

Virtual Worlds, Real Lives: Exploring Women's Webs

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Cyborgs and Masculinity

Theorists interested in how gender influences new information technologies often talk about cyberspace as a new frontier to be explored and claimed. Although we have difficulties defining exactly what we envision when we use terms such as 'cyberspace' and 'cyborg'—the elusive inhabitant of cyberspace—we refer to cyberspace as a possible outlet for change, and the construct of the cyborg as an avatar of such change (see, e.g., Covino, Kolko, Laurel, Hockenberry). What we forget, however, is that cyberspace often presents an extension of traditional norms, continuing current perceptions of social and economic order, government structures, and educational institutions (Gabilondo, Sandoval, Stone). Communication in such an environment, and the resulting perception of reality—virtual or not—tends to uphold current systems and accepted subject positions. Furthermore, we are inclined to forget that there are *many* cyberspaces and that a multitude of cyborgs—created by those who know how to manipulate the machines and their users—inhabit these spaces.

Although Donna Haraway elevates the cyborg as a creation that will destroy current conceptions of power, manipulators of virtual worlds frequently represent a patriarchal, authoritarian structure and create a patriarchal, authoritarian cyborg. Joseph Schaub, for example, points out that "the cyborg has done as much to reify existing stereotypes about gender as it has to eradicate them. Hyper-masculine cyborg creations portrayed by



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Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator movies suggest that . . . a world devoid of women, leaving only men and machines, rules Hollywood today” (Schaub). Clearly, cyborgian representations personified by Schwarzenegger and his more technologically advanced counterpart in *Terminator II* promote a cyborg world that is built on the same hierarchical and patriarchal structures already in place. Movie incarnations of the cyborg show a masculine figure, and even strong female characters such as the woman warrior played by Linda Hamilton in *Terminator II* display masculine tendencies of violence and aggression. Cyberpunk fiction portrays the world of human-machine integration as dominated by aggression, war, power plays, and abject misery for the unfortunate masses. Andrew Ross, for example, has pointed out that Walker Gibson’s *Neuromancer* continues male fantasies of a science fiction future: “Cyberpunk’s idea of a counterpolitics—youthful male heroes with working-class chips on their shoulders and postmodern biochips in their brains—seems to have little to do with the burgeoning power of the great social movements of our day: feminism, ecology, peace, sexual liberation, and civil rights” (152). Furthermore, images of the information superhighway as a race for power and control create a virtual world governed by male-identified subject positions. Gendered behavior and gendered discourse of readily available ‘real world’ prototypes are translated into futuristic human/machine incarnations, seemingly creating mirror images of present day inequalities. The result of such colonization, as Joseba Gabilondo points out, is that “the cyborg is not the general, post-modern form of subjectivity created by multinational capitalism but rather the hegemonic subject positions that its ideology privileges” (424).

This bleak picture, however, is interrupted by oppositional discourse initiated by groups of people and individuals who do not

subscribe to a male-dominated cyber-philosophy. Women, for example, are increasingly using cyberspaces to present their versions of a cyborgian presence to other women and other users of the Web. Grrrl sites, women activist sites, and other sites by and for women provide a variety of outlooks on the cyber-cultures developing online. Whether women try to remorph gender with these sites, or whether they intend to de-territorialize knowledge, their Web pages are an expression of their presence on the Web. They are there to “shape and manage,” because otherwise, as Keng Chua postulates, “they might find themselves/ourselves being shaped and managed once again through the new technologies,” having to follow a prescribed online identity and fixed online discourse conventions

This study shows how one woman, Gabrielle L. Gabrielle, manages and portrays *herself* in an online environment. I explore how she creates and shapes her virtual identity and her real personality on the World Wide Web and in her New York City apartment. Specifically, I analyze how Gabrielle’s visual presentations and her discursive practices intertwine the personal with the virtual to expand and alter traditional rhetorical paradigms. A close analysis of the Website, and phone and email conversations, are the basis for discussing the possible reasons for portraying a narrative identity that focuses on the personal while addressing a widely dispersed, largely unknown, and mostly impersonal audience. This paper hopefully creates further interest in in-depth analyses of how women’s cyborg lives and their Web-constructed narrative identities relate to their offline lives.

Cyborgian Women: Expanding the Tradition



Women’s online presentations vary widely. One female Web creator, for example, wants cyberspace to be mythical because “unless we have sacred elements in cyberspace, we can’t be in it without being dehumanized. But if there are places in



cyberspace . . . where we can act mythically, then it will resemble the real world in our imagination” (*KarinSpace*). Our imagination, then, allows us to use online spaces to play, think, imagine, work,

create, invent, produce, discover, learn, display, watch, comment, observe, relax, study, examine, investigate, and enjoy. In essence, it allows us to write our own stories in our own words. The *purposes* for choosing to write ourselves into a virtual environment are varied. Women might want to be mythical; they also might want to be present online for political, social, or professional reasons; some might want to be an oppositional voice to accepted norms. As a result, Web pages created by women are varied, ranging from playful and fun to serious and professional. Hyperlinks can be predictable, or they can lead to unexpected places. We might be given glimpses—visual, oral, or written—into offline lives; we also might be kept guessing who the creators of these pages might be. Are they incarnations of Sybil, an anarchistic Brunhilde, or a cyborgian Diva? Are the stories told online reflective of their offline lives? Are they creating an illusory reality or a real illusion? Can we ever find out who they *really* are? And why would we want to know, especially if we believe that the Web, as Allucquere Rosanne Stone puts it, allows for a “complex and shifting play of body, self, and community” (3)?



Despite the apparent endorsement of cyberspace as a liberatory space, Stone and others are also critical of new technologies. Stone, for example, argues that

To believe that in cyberspace everyone is equal merely because the codings that have attached themselves to voice quality and physical appearance have been uncoupled from their referents, and that this uncoupling provides a sensation that might be perceived as inherently liberatory, is to misunderstand how power works. (181)

Thus, cyberspace is not constructed as a space devoid of existing social and political injustices. Many Web creators transport offline beliefs and narratives into an online world, and they decide to incorporate words, voices, and images connected to their offline selves into the virtual spaces they inhabit. They do not “uncouple” their offline from their online selves, but instead create composites that reflect the different realities of their lives.

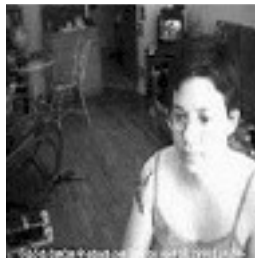
Recent studies on women’s Webpages have started to explore women’s multiple positionalities as addressed in Stone’s work. For example, Keng Chua postulates that women are in the process of

staking their claims on Web terrains. She argues for prioritizing a research agenda that addresses gender in virtual space to counteract current notions of the Web as a masculine space. Kris Blair and Pamela Takayoshi show that women's online (re)presentations are often essentialist and that Web creators use a "cultural default definition" of woman in their visual online presentations, thus introducing a preset and mostly erroneous narrative to many Web spaces created by women. They argue for "expanding online representations of and opportunities for disenfranchised groups, particularly women, so they are not made to feel as if they are either virtual victims or virtual aliens, but virtual citizens" (Blair and Takayoshi). Furthermore, Lisa Gerrard, Gail Hawisher, and contributors to *Computers and Composition* (see especially the 1999 issue on "Computers, Composition and Gender") and *Kairos* (see volume 2, issue 2) have started to look at women's Web pages and the impact of such pages on the composition of the Web.

My study is situated within these explorations of online women's spaces, using them as a starting point for an in-depth exploration of Gabrielle's Web page. Now that we have begun to acknowledge the work of women on the Web, it is necessary to provide careful analyses of women's contributions and to ask the women themselves why they choose to tell their stories and why they have decided to present themselves—visually and verbally—online.

Creating Real Virtuality and Virtual Reality

GabGab, a.k.a. Gabrielle L. Gabrielle, doesn't mind including her 'real life' image on the Web. On the contrary, whoever logs on to *GabGab CamCam* can see her, her apartment, her cat, and occasionally her husband. The digital camcorder updates Gabrielle's picture every 30 seconds, and the Web surfer can watch GabGab work on her computer, sleep on the couch, and pet the cat. She leaves her room—office, living room, bedroom—rarely because she is busy writing articles as a freelance writer. And almost every day we, the viewers, get a written update on Gabrielle's life, her adventures in New York, her interactions with her editors, her responses to email she gets, and her explorations of new topics she is interested in. We can read about the newest development in Gabrielle's life on the left-hand side while watching her image super-imposed on a bright pink background on the right-hand side.



First, Gabrielle announces her Website to those who visit her virtual home and who want to know more about the site:

Welcome to the *GabGab CamCam* — a 24-hour, LIVE, free Webcam peeking in on the real life of New York City freelance writer Gabrielle L. Gabrielle. Watch as she pens sex, relationship, self-help and news articles for your favorite magazines and newspapers, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Woman's World*, *Jump*, *The New York Daily News*, *Girls' Life*, *Complete Woman*, *Teen People*, *Vibe* and more. (*GabGab CamCam*)

This introduction gives the viewer/reader a glimpse into Gabrielle's offline life. Partly it reads like an advertisement, tempting the reader to partake in a "free" showing of a New York City's freelance writer's "real life." The list of magazines and newspapers intensifies the commercial as well as professional appeal of the introductory remarks. Furthermore, the removed third person voice creates a distance between what is written on the page and the writer of these initial words.

Despite the obvious distancing in the beginning, however, the remainder of the Website revolves around the personal: Gabrielle's interests, various encounters in New York, and her viewers'/readers' comments. After the initial page that sports the daily update and the Web camera pictures, readers can click on "FAQFAQ" to get answers to recurring questions; they can move on to "MailMail" to find out what kinds of interesting email Gabrielle has received; they can stop by at the "GalleryGallery" to see some pictures created by the Web camera, copied and sent back to Gabrielle by faithful viewers; they can move on to "UpdatesArchives", the place where the daily updates can be found; and they can go to "EmailMe" and send a message to Gabrielle. Gabrielle's Web camera continues to update itself every 30 seconds in the right frame while the reader moves from site to site. No other graphics distract from the Web camera, or from the text pages in the left frame.

To get a better perspective on the Web creator of *GabGab CamCam*, her reasons for writing a mostly personal column to an unknown audience, and her willingness to include a Web camera in her page, Gabrielle and I decided to talk over the phone rather than by email. It's April 14; 4:00 p.m. here in the Southwest; 7:00 p.m. in New York; time for our pre-arranged phone interview. I call Gabrielle's number after checking out the Web page pretty thor-

oughly. Right now, it's not focused on the room; instead, it looks out onto the playground. On the top of the screen I can read: "watch the playground for more fights while we cuddle." I call anyway, mainly because I want to appear professional and be on time. Gabrielle picks up the phone, but asks me to call back in 30 minutes. Her husband just stopped by, and, well, they are in the middle of cuddling.

Thirty minutes later, the Web camera is turned back to the room. Gabrielle is sitting on her couch/bed, and I consider it safe to call again. This time, we are on, and we talk for more than an hour and a half about Gabrielle's background, the projects she is working on, how she got interested in the Web and in using Webcams, what she wants to tell others with her writing, how she deals with offensive messages, how her online life has influenced her in her day-to-day activities, and many other topics that come up during the conversation. Gabrielle is easy to talk with; she is outgoing, open, and friendly. Her image on the screen shows that she is deeply engaged in the conversation, moving her arms to clarify an idea for herself, listening closely to the questions, and picking up on comments made earlier in the conversation. While we talk, I scroll through Gabrielle's Webpages, trying to avoid questions that she already answered in "FAQFAQ".

According to "FAQFAQ", Gabrielle L. Gabrielle was born in 1970 in a small working class suburb of Long Island. Her name, she tells her readers, is very real and the product of her mother's stuttering. She received her degree in English and Literature from Binghamton University and moved to New York City soon after. After an accident with a New York City cab—which left her with severe epilepsy—she had to leave graduate school and the job she held during that time. Her jobs since she moved to NYC include administrative assistant to the director of development at one of NYC's oldest social service agencies, assistant to a dean at NYU while attending graduate school, exotic/lap dancer, assistant to a CEO at a market research firm, associate and managing editor of *Playgirl Magazine*, and freelance writer for about 10 different national publications. She is now working on three books and is writing articles for the newspapers and magazines she lists on the top of her page. And, the readers of the "FAQFAQ" section find out, she is happily married to Douglas, a musician, record producer, and member of a band. She also lets us know—and we can see it on her Web camera—that she has tattoos and piercings on various parts of her body. She writes that she gets about a million hits a month and over 100 email messages a day—80 to 90 percent of which she answers.

This short synopsis of Gabrielle's life gives us glimpses into her professional and personal offline activities. The information could certainly have been imaginary, but Gabrielle assures me on the phone that she did not make up wild stories about herself. Her online self—although less formal and more personal in her narrative strategies—is a creation of her offline self. Through her visual presentation and through the text included in her pages, she creates and recreates GabGab's online identity and Gabrielle's offline image. We are invited to participate in the formation of the 'self' she presents us with on the Web.

Gabrielle's Reality: Camera Glimpses into the Life of a Very Real Virtual Woman

As Blair and Takayoshi point out, visual presentations of women in movies and on the Web often contribute to their objectification, creating "images of women for men." Hollywood movies or Websites such as *Babes on the Web* are exemplifications of this trend. Even sites that are created by women for women often promote narrowly defined representations of women. And sites by women for a mixed audience, Blair and Takayoshi maintain, can contribute to women's roles as the "consumed." In their discussion of *Jennicam*, a site that includes a Web camera, they warn that although this site could be seen as feminist since Jenni has "control over the presentation of her own image online and her control of what her male viewers are able to gaze," it mainly attracts male viewers who limit her status to that of "object of desire." Certainly, *Jennicam* is not the only Web camera site, and a large number of women and men use Web cameras as part of their Web pages and as part of a reality they create for their viewers.

GabGab CamCam is popular with Web browsers partly because of the Web camera. For Gabrielle, this is not a question of being objectified by her viewers. Instead, she considers watching others—in the park, on the street, or through a window—as quite natural since it makes people feel more connected. It was due to her own interest in the personal and everyday events in people's lives that she put up her Web camera (Gabrielle, Telephone interview). In "FAQFAQ" she gives a more flippant answer to the question of "Why did you put up a 24-hour Web cam?":



Why does anybody? Because I like to inadvertently moon you while I sleep, because I want the whole world to know when I've got spinach stuck in my teeth, because I love the way I look when I first wake up in the morning and want to share it with as many people as I can

Gabrielle's response, half mocking, half serious, points to the personal and mundane in her life. Implicitly, she lets us know that the camera captures events that are 'real.' In another post, for example, she explains that "from about 9 am to 12, I'm usually gearing up to work, making my first round of calls and starting to put on my 'puter face' which I like to think looks like I'm deep in thought, trying to perfect the ultimate line for my Pulitzer-winning article, but which really just looks a lot like I'm mesmerized by a bug that's crawling across the left side of your desk" (Gabrielle, "FAQFAQ"). Gabrielle focuses her answers on the personal, creating an online persona who is funny, witty, and willing to divulge information about herself without knowing her audience.

On a more serious note, Gabrielle responds to another reader/viewer who is interested in why she "really" put up a Web camera. She explains that she started watching an HBO series about the "real life of a New York writer" and got more and more "nauseous" because it didn't look "like the life of any real NYC writer I've ever met." She continues:

I have some strong feelings about how the life of a Manhattan writer is portrayed. We're not these rich, bubbly, utterly gorgeous socialites. Most of us are actually dirt poor, bespectacled, over-educated, socially backward hermits. Therefore, I decided to put up a Webcam to chronicle the real goings on of a gal trying to make it as a writer in the Big City. ("FAQFAQ")

Similar to Jennifer Ringley of *Jennicam*, Gabrielle's Web camera is intended to "show whatever is going on naturally." For Gabrielle, however, this does not mean to show different body parts and to let viewers guess what they are. Instead, it means sitting in front of the computer, staring at the screen while she is working on an article for one of the magazines, watching TV, and eating dinner. However, Gabrielle admits that although she considers herself to be "natural," she is more conscious about herself. For example, she "wears clothes all the time" because she wants to keep the site

“PG13.” This shows an awareness of herself as an ‘object of desire’; however, it also shows that she makes the decision to squelch that desire. Despite her willingness to let others look into the electronic open door, she also points out that her virtual home does have a “screen door because you can’t come inside” (Gabrielle, Telephone interview). And furthermore, she decides when to close the virtual door by pointing the camera out the window.

Gabrielle’s comments in “FAQFAQ” make it clear that she controls the images that get recorded for everybody to see. For example, although the camera is on all the time, she shifts the focus from her room to out the window from time to time. She explains the reason for this in a post on “FAQFAQ”:

You know how in all of those old romantic movies with stars like Clark Gable and Gregory Peck they pan to the window as soon as things start steaming up between the sheets? Well, that’s what’s going on here. Unfortunately, watching me and my hubby being intimate is not included in the price of admission to the Gab-Gab CamCam. When Douglas and I want to *cuddle* you’ll get a wonderful view of my street and the pigeons on my fire escape.



Gabrielle controls the extent of her viewers’ participation and their agency. Focusing the camera eye on a different setting also forces the viewers’ gaze away from Gabrielle. Shifting back the gaze can only occur when Gabrielle allows it. Viewers from this perspective are dependent on the camera’s angle; they can only claim agency in a limited way. From this perspective, the question of who is objectified (“watching me”) and who is the objectifier (turning the camera), who is the consumer and who is the consumed, is complicated by Gabrielle’s agency, her ownership over the Web camera, and more importantly, her ownership over her body.

One of the questions that I wanted to ask Gabrielle, but which was already answered on “FAQFAQ”, was about the amount of

offensive email messages she receives and what the breakup of male/female viewers of her site is. Similarly to the person asking the question, I assumed that more men visit the site, “just peeking through the window” (“FAQFAQ”). Surprisingly, Gabrielle responded that only two to three percent of the email messages are offensive. Furthermore, she receives about equal amounts of email from men and women. She explains the reasons in the following way:

men and women are either:

- a) equally voyeuristic, dispelling the notion that women can't be anything but chaste, pure, fetish-free androids who knit baby booties all day
- b) equally interested in a Webcam site that doesn't offer tons of nudity or sex, dispelling the notion that men use their penis like a divining rod to make all their entertainment choices, or
- c) equally entertained by a whining, complaining, neurotic New Yorker, dispelling the notion that no one ever would be (“FAQFAQ”).



Similar to her post on why she installed a Web camera, Gabrielle partly makes fun of herself—the whining, complaining, neurotic New Yorker—and also makes fun of her viewers' assumptions of gendered behavior—women as chaste and pure and men as sex-crazed. Furthermore, her representation of herself does not conform to traditional media representations of women as objects of desire and 'performers' of femininity (see Blair and Takayoshi). The online comments about her use of the Web camera undermine simple notions of dichotomous relationships between being objectified and being empowered. Although she knows that some viewers are only interested in her body (and more of it), this is not a major concern for Gabrielle. Instead, she becomes an embodied subject through her online presence. She decides who to let into her life, establishes connections with her readers, and establishes herself as somebody interesting enough to have virtual visitors. She points out that she keeps the Web camera going because it creates a “feeling of belonging to a unique high-tech community, being privy to the inner workings of other people's lives who are out there in the world, and who I'd never meet otherwise” (“FAQFAQ”).

Gabrielle's Web camera, then, invites readers and viewers to share part of her life, and it provides an opportunity for her to be heard and seen and to establish online relationships that extend beyond her small New York City studio apartment. Her offline life merges with her online life partly through the visual presentation she provides for her readers. The physical body, as Beth Kolko put it, literally "goes along for the virtual ride" (18). However, it is not just the visible body that 'personalizes' her online life; Gabrielle also establishes close connections with her audience through her online commentary and narratives on various issues important in her life as a freelance writer.

Writing Herself into Being: Establishing an Online Voice

Gabrielle's Web camera is a major attraction for many viewers. However, Gabrielle does not only define herself visually. Although the right frame is focused on Gabrielle's image, the left frame is taken up by text. The first page always sports the daily update which gives her an outlet for her "own personal column, a column unmolested by any constipated pissed-off editor armed with a red pen" ("FAQFAQ"). In our conversation on the phone, Gabrielle also pointed out that the magazines she is writing for "all have their own distinct style" without leaving room for incorporating creativity and personality into a writer's work. As she points out, "you must study and copy, literally line by line, their style" (Telephone interview).

The daily Web column provides a more creative outlet for Gabrielle's narratives. In addition to being a writing exercise for her, it is also a way to work on her personal style and to keep a journal. Her memory, she points out, was damaged after her accident, "so if I don't write something down, I'll forget it, even if it's just a very good memory of me going to the park. It will just be dissolved into nothing just because the place where my memory is held is damaged. So this is also great for me because I get to look back and say, oh, look what I did, oh, look at that, that's great" (Telephone interview).

For Gabrielle, then, the daily column fulfills various functions: she is able to escape the proscribed style of the magazines she writes for; she can develop and exercise her own writing style; and she can use the column as a journal that helps her remember events in her life. Unlike a personal journal, however, Gabrielle's column can be accessed by any reader who happens to log on to her site. Instead of writing only for herself, then, she writes for a

virtual audience whom she knows only if they email her. However, the anonymity of her virtual readers does not inhibit Gabrielle's efforts to write about herself and her experiences. On the contrary, her narrative identity partly depends on her audience's 'virtuality,' the absence of specific identities to which she can relate, and the knowledge that her viewers/readers could be anybody. And what connects "anybody," it seems, is a close interest in the personal aspects of other's lives.¹

The daily columns are stored in the "UpdatesArchives". Gabrielle's topics include among many others atheism, her impressions of *The Howard Stern Show*, voyeurism, the Columbine High School massacre, banking laws, relationship issues, why calls from work are annoying, and the reasons for joining the Independent Party. Her commentary is often divided into various parts. First, she writes about issues that are of interest to her—from radio and TV shows, news, or personal convictions and beliefs. Often, she also includes events that happened to her, her husband, and her cats, people she is meeting, or interviews she is conducting. Usually, she concludes by writing about what she is working on in her life as a freelance journalist. Her narrative discourse addresses the personal in every section, but she often moves from issues that are more general to issues that are very specific to her own life.²

The first section of the column is in large part a commentary on current news events. After listening to an accident report, for example, on April 2, 1999, Gabrielle writes:

On the news this morning, I heard a report that went like this: "A man was hit by a subway car this morning at around 6am. As a result, there are delays of up to one hour." That was it. No details about how the guy was doing. If he was dead. Or still being dragged and subsequently dissected under the wheels of the train. Just a comment about how whoever he was had slowed down the morning commute. And this wasn't even the traffic report. It was actually the morning news. ("UpdatesArchives")

Two-line accident reports are thus turned into starting points for Gabrielle's personal commentary. Gabrielle's outrage at the callousness of this report is obvious. According to her interpretation of the broadcaster's comments, the important issue was slowed-down traffic and not the life of a human being. By addressing this

incident in her column, Gabrielle points out the problems with such a report and at the same time establishes her own pathos as a journalist who sees news as personal, not mechanical. In her own online writing she is not afraid to voice her opinion. On the contrary, she considers it important to include the personal to make sure that news reports value human life over the convenience of train passengers.

As a case in point, on April 21, 1999, Gabrielle approaches the shooting at Columbine High School from a personal level and discusses her own problems in school instead of spending time and energy on going over the horrible events:

When I was going through my teen years, life at home sucked which made me dress differently and act less buoyantly than the other kids at school. So, yeah, the other students would insult me and even pick fights with me — even the boys who I had no problem beating up despite my diminutive size — just because of my differences. But what really raised my ire was the way the teachers and administrative staff treated me worse than the students. And I'm not alone. I've been on the phone with a bunch of friends today and yesterday who report similar experiences where supposed adults at school regularly belittle and insult kids who look different and give special favors to the 'in' crowd. So, when life is frustrating at home and frustrating at the only other place a high school student goes, which is school, kids can and do turn into ticking timebombs ready to explode. ("UpdatesArchives")

This posting addresses an issue that is of concern to many teenagers, parents, and teachers, and has been widely discussed in the news and on talk shows. Right from the beginning, Gabrielle uses first person, explaining her experiences as a teenager who was different and who was otherized by her classmates and her teachers. With her comments, she establishes her authority on the issue because she herself was a victim of a system that valued conformity and punished difference. In this post, similar to many of the other online commentary she provides, Gabrielle establishes a bond with her largely unknown audience by uncovering her own history, thus creating an online narrative identity that is characterized by a desire to make sense of largely incomprehensible events and connect with unknown readers through personal storytelling.

After providing her readers with her own experience, she also points out that “I’m not alone.” She moves from the ‘I’ to a more general ‘kids’ and ‘students,’ and she also suggests ways of diffusing some of the problems faced by teenagers:

students need more access and encouragement to counseling to have an outlet for their emotions. And to diffuse their rage, they need to be taught coping skills for stress, since I have yet to experience nearly the same amount of stress I used to experience when I was a teen. But it wasn’t until my 20s I even heard of stress coping skills. After so many school massacres, it’s got to be pretty evident that something more than just more guards and metal detectors needs to be installed in America’s schools. (“UpdatesArchives”)

Gabrielle’s rapport with her audience is again established by revealing more about her personal life story. She bases her suggestions on her own experiences as a teenager and her own struggles to ‘survive’ high school.

Gabrielle doesn’t only post her own comments on the shooting, she also brings in emails that she received after her posting. Readers of her column are eager to participate in the conversation, and similarly to Gabrielle, they construct their own online identities by focusing on the personal:

Tony: I actually have family that attend that school and am friends with some of the teachers at that school. I can tell you that the attitude here is numbing.

Joseph: The nation needs to wake up and say to themselves that the problem is not guns, music, or anything else. The real problem is peer abuse and the way that teachers and faculty look away from it. In my high school faculty didn’t care about the ‘outcasts’ they only cared about the ‘in’ crowd.

Heather: I find it fascinating that when things like this happen everyone brings up all the problems that surfaced the last time something like this happened and it seems that we, as Americans, aren’t making any progress. We analyze and fight and blame it on gun control, and Marilyn Manson, and movies, and the media, and I forgot when it happened that we weren’t responsible for ourselves?!?!?! (“UpdatesArchives”)

The readers' comments emphasize the reality of these problems; they also establish connections between Gabrielle and her audience that move beyond an easy distinction of reader/writer and virtual/real world. The problems addressed in these posts, and the interest of the readers/writers place the virtual discussion in 'real' situations. They also establish connections between readers by foregrounding the personal involvement of the writers. And although Gabrielle and the writers of these posts do not know their virtual audience, they establish a bond that is based on personal interest in a specific issue.

Gabrielle follows her opinions about a large variety of issues by writing that emphasizes the 'personal' even more, providing readers with insights that can't be gleaned from looking at the Web camera or from reading her columns in magazines and newspapers:

Well, I started out the day with a seizure. Which is always a good excuse for staying in bed an extra half hour. Actually, I felt this thing coming on for a few days now. And even thought I'd be ending up sprawled on the street last night as I walked home from The Bat Cave, the recording studio where the TranceSenders were doing their final mix. It's funny how sometimes I can feel a seizure coming on days in advance, and sometimes my body gives me only a few moment's warning. Kinda like my period. ("UpdatesArchives")

Gabrielle employs first-person throughout her column, but the second part becomes more focused on Gabrielle's own life. She no longer provides commentary and opinions, but instead narrates and describes events that might or might not be important to her readers. Here, she does not encourage feedback but only makes others aware of what has happened to her. She lets them into her life, opening a window that the Web camera doesn't show. Again, Gabrielle constructs her online narrative voice as highly personal and distinct from her journalistic offline voice. The elusiveness of her virtual audience does not discourage Gabrielle in her efforts to divulge parts of her personal and intimate experiences. On the contrary, the absence of an identified readership seems to encourage Gabrielle in her choice of narrative style.

Although the topics Gabrielle addresses vary widely, her entries are consistent in structure, style, and tone. She moves from discussing a large variety of issues and current events that are of inter-

est to her to more personal commentary that directly relates to her life. Her column is well written but informal; it is intended for an audience that is willing to listen to strong opinions and an audience that wants to read about the personal life of a New York City freelance writer. Her virtual readers and her virtual column, then, provide an audience and an outlet for Gabrielle's perspectives on social, political, and personal issues important to her. And Gabrielle knows that she is not just writing into an uninhabited virtual vastness. Her narratives, and her skills at storytelling, are appreciated by many readers (her site receives over a million hits every month). And although most readers remain unknown, Gabrielle creates connections that do not depend on face-to-face interactions or in-depth knowledge about the reader. They depend on Gabrielle's narrative voice and her willingness to share personal life stories with her audience.

Making Connections with her Readers and Viewers: Email

Some of Gabrielle's readers correspond with her through email and let her know that they read her column regularly and are interested in her life and work. Most days, Gabrielle gets about 80 to 100 email messages and responds to about 80 to 90 percent of them. From time to time, Gabrielle includes viewers' messages (such as the ones shown above), or she provides comments about email she has received in her daily updates. In "MailMail", she provides a more regular sampling of the email she receives every week. Similar to her other links, the postings in "MailMail" are updated on a regular basis. They reflect the reactions of new viewers, focusing on the pictures created through the Web camera, but also include thoughtful comments from those who read Gabrielle's column regularly. For example, Christine from the Bay Area, compliments Gabrielle on her site:

I'm glad I checked out your link Your Webpage is awesome! Thanks for sharing your thoughts and your life with all of us out here. I've got a 'zine myself, and it is encouraging to see others leveraging their talents and feelings and experiences via the Web. ("MailMail")

Christine establishes a virtual connection by writing an email. She applauds Gabrielle for creating a Website which provides an outlet for expressing thoughts and feelings, but which also allows Gabrielle to show her talents as a journalist. Christine is encour-

aged by other women who publish on the Web. Similarly, Gabrielle emphasizes that women need to create their own Webpages and fight for their 'homestead' on the net because "there is so much out there for them" (Telephone interview).

Gabrielle also receives more specific email messages about her column. Since she has a strong opinion on almost anything, some messages question her convictions on atheism, others applaud her on being open about "unpopular views." Her posts also encourage readers to tell about how their own experiences relate to the topics discussed by Gabrielle. Randy uses Gabrielle's post on Safir to write about the problems of defending an African American man in Kansas City:

I enjoyed your article about Safir. I used to be an investigator in Kansas City. I worked solely for lawyers and I did a case where the cops obliterated a man in a car wreck; since he was black they screwed him and his family. Then I got the case and turned it around. I went public but no one cared . . . ("MailMail")

GabGab CamCam also attracts viewers/readers from outside the United States. For example, a person from the UK writes:

I was surfing one lunchtime at work and happened upon your site, been hooked ever since . . . After a few days you built up a big fan club here and after the weather you're the biggest topic of discussion. We're watching now and the main topic is (sad people here) when are you going to make the bed. I told you sad people. ("MailMail")

This is not the only message from overseas. Gabrielle receives email from browsers in Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Arab Nations. And although many of them mention that "sorry, my English is very poor," they risk sending an email to Gabrielle. Gabrielle is excited about this development. She wants to be connected with people everywhere, even if communication is sometimes difficult. And although she sees the dangers of the technological age—that it could isolate us from each other—she also is hopeful that it could "connect even more of us" (Telephone interview). Gabrielle posts the messages that ask her to "please please don't fall into that show your stuff trap for the nuts out there" and "you're funny. I wanna be gabgab when I grow up!"



But she also includes those that ask for “a little more skin” that compliment her on her “excellent flesh tones,” and that comment on her tattoos. However, Gabrielle is not interested in showing “more skin.” Instead, she is proud that viewers are not only interested in her physical appearance but that they read her column and write her back about it. She also wants to encourage others

to build their own Websites—with or without a camera—because she considers the Web “a virtual frontier” that especially women need to explore more (Telephone interview).

“GabGab MailMail” shows the connections between Gabrielle, her Website, her Web camera, her columns, and the reader/viewer. By incorporating her audience into her Website, she encourages reader/writer interactions that are immediately recognized. Gabrielle becomes part of a larger community, and the readers become part of Gabrielle’s text. Through these dialogic connections established by Gabrielle, the audience becomes the author, and Gabrielle takes on authorship while also becoming the audience. However, although there is a clear sign of reciprocity apparent in Gabrielle’s site, Gabrielle expresses control by choosing what to post and by choosing whether and how to respond to the comments she receives from her readers. From this perspective, Gabrielle controls the actions to be taken.³

Finding a Narrative Frame: Images, Words, Reality, and Virtuality

Gabrielle ‘tells stories’ because she wants to be part of an online community and because she wants to show others the ‘real’ life of a NYC freelance writer. Her online life is influenced by her offline life, and she also admits that her offline life has changed because of her online life. She is free to write what she wants to in her column and can develop her writing skills while at the same time developing an online readership; she is careful to maintain a ‘clean’ site which partly restricts her movements in her apartment. Through her online communications, she has also realized that people can’t be easily categorized. She receives messages from readers who “she would never meet in the street” and she corresponds with people whose world views are very different.

Throughout her Web page and in our interview, Gabrielle emphasizes the reciprocal nature of communication and the

importance of making connections. Her viewers are influenced by her narrative discourse, and Gabrielle is influenced by her viewers' comments. She has even started to consider some of her email correspondents as her friends. Sometimes she also meets people she has gotten to know online in her very real New York life. The largely personal aspect of her online identity and online voice seems to strengthen Gabrielle's rapport with her readers. And although she only knows a small fragment of her readers "in real life," her narrative style has created a sense of community among Gabrielle and her readership. In a sense, Gabrielle creates closeness among virtual strangers by writing herself online and by inviting her audience to listen to her voice and to share parts of her virtual and real lives.

Gabrielle's use of narrative voice, as my paper has shown, focuses on connecting the virtual with the personal. Her voices, as Sampaio and Aragon point out, are in effect "being continuously multiplied, dispersed, and even deconstructed in cyberspace" (Sampaio and Aragon). To foreground the importance of women's diverse narrative voices on- and offline, and to explore more fully whether and how the personal becomes an integral part in online narratives, it is important to focus on how women use online rhetoric as an extension of their 'real' selves, and how their offline selves change because of their online voices. What is 'natural'—or what is considered online and offline—always shifts and always changes. Or, as Gabrielle puts it, "I always express my offline life in my online life and get feedback which is almost a hermaphroditic experience" (Telephone interview). GabGab's and Gabrielle's narrative voices converge, and narrative identity is expanded to include virtual worlds and real lives.

This paper is intended as a starting point for further analyses, and I encourage others to look carefully at different women's contributions and to interact with these women to make sure that we let them speak about their online and offline (re)presentations. Then we will be able to gain a better understanding of the differences among women's virtual contributions, their purposes for creating Web pages, and their diverse perspectives on the role of narrative identity in Web spaces.

Notes

¹ The recent events surrounding John Kennedy's death are a case in point. Similar to other tragic events, personal stories and narratives bring people together.

² Gabrielle is aware that although she considers writing on her Web page as a personal and freeing exercise, she has to modify her style and tone to fit her audience's needs. Thus, she makes sure that she doesn't use swear words, that she writes clearly, and that her column can be read by anybody who has an open mind. And although she discusses sex and sexual relationships, she does not use 'lurid detail' so that parents don't have to be worried about their kids logging on to her site. Her offline beliefs in what is appropriate and inappropriate, then, are clearly reflected in her choice of online language.

³ Gabrielle's agency is also apparent in her approach to offensive messages. The ones she doesn't deem worth her time she ignores. If she responds, she confronts the writer or undermines the message's negativity by 'playing games' with the originator of the offensive commentary. She is not discouraged by offensive or negative messages. As she points out, "it's human nature for there to be bad" (Telephone interview).

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