I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of
philosophical and scientific discourse, one cannot get along
without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing
where it comes from and how it functions.

(Jacques Derrida, 15 July 1930–9 October 2004)\(^1\)

For all it may be older than Martin Guerre,\(^2\) identity theft is the crime of the moment.

As this issue goes to press, government agencies describe identity theft as the
fastest growing criminal activity,\(^3\) our in-boxes are besieged with spam apparently
attempting some form of it, and a public lecture discusses the way it redefines
identity as something external to the self.\(^4\) At the same time, no television channel’s
evening schedule seems complete without some foray into forensic science,
fictional or otherwise, where investigators try to pin down selves who would rather
leave no trace. And a proliferation of reality television programmes encourages
participants to construct selves for public consumption, and to become truer to
themselves through self-transformation.\(^5\) The enthusiastic re-fashioning of the self
sits oddly with the simultaneous disquiet at the notion of identity as transferable or

\(^{1}\) From the discussion following the 1966 presentation at Johns Hopkins University of
"Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences", in Richard Macksey and
Eugenio Donato (eds), The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the

\(^{2}\) The biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau gives one of the earliest instances of the crime.
Furthermore, Jacob, who poses as his brother to steal his birthright, goes on to be a victim of a
similar substitution when he unknowingly marries his betrothed’s sister.

\(^{3}\) Statements to this effect have been made by The US Federal Trade Commission, the
Australasian Centre for Policing Research, and the Australian Government Information
Management Office, while L'Expansion comments on government response to the rise in identity
theft in France (Thomas Huehon, "Cybercriminalité: la riposte française arrive", L'Expansion,

\(^{4}\) Mark Poster, "Identity Theft, or What's the Use of Having an Identity", public lecture at
University of Queensland, 7 October 2004.

\(^{5}\) A sample of French reality programmes screened over the past year includes: Le Pensionnat
de Chavagnes, Star Academy, Queer: cinq experts dans le vent, La Ferme célébrités and Loft
detachable, but both tendencies suggest a current preoccupation with the plasticity of individual identity running deeper even than matters of national security or unauthorized credit card use. Whether moulded by circumstance or subject to fraud, either way the self is seen as forged.

Popular expressions of the instability of identity are supported by developments in theory, similarly drawn toward an interrogation of selfhood. The fortunes of the concept of the self in the twentieth century are typically recounted as a slide from unity to dispersal, a shift from a given aspect of what it is to be human to an unending process of construction, a transformation viewed variously with anxiety, jubilation, or a combination of the two. The role of theorists writing in French is understood to have provided key moments in this narrative, during which the self has been seen as constructed to a greater or lesser degree through the work of language (Saussure), ideology (Althusser), identifications (Lacan), discourse and "technologies of the self" (Foucault), called into question by the Other (Lévinas), and further de- and reterritorialized (Deleuze and Guattari), liberated through pleasure (Barthes), pulverized as the sujet en procès (Kristeva), and disseminated through text in the broadest sense of the word (Derrida) without ever being entirely liquidated.

Such a biography, however, paints a paradoxically unified picture of the fluid and pluralized subject, suggesting not only that the shift in conceptualization of the self has been universally accepted, but that the workings of its acceptance in various contexts are identical. Yet, discourses of self-transformation often co-exist— and almost comfortably— with a persistent belief in the self as a unique and enduring interior consciousness, for example when the renovation of the self is seen to lead to the discovery of the "real me". Furthermore, while the constructedness of identity is widely accepted, its uptake varies: the narrative of dispersal may have been privileged in theoretical discourses but the identity-formation narrative remains the reference point of choice in many other places. As we shall see, rare are the instances where no tension between these impulses, between scattering and solidifying, between shifting and sustaining, can be found. That tension, however, is played out in diverse ways.

For versions of the self are dispersed across multiple sites, discourses and disciplines, and articulated in the most unlikely places. They appear not only in prime-time television, avant-garde and theoretical texts, but in self-help groups, education, fashion and cosmetic surgery as they are in psychoanalysis. If autobiography flaunts its subject, even science— "une idéologie de la suppression du sujet" in Lacan's view— camouflage a writing subject among impersonal grammatical constructions. The articles in the present volume indicate that selves can be traced in diary entries, with their rhythmic and iterative production of an avowed self, but also in lyric poetry, no less subjective for not declaring the self as its subject, in philosophical treatises, where the instance of writing cannot avoid producing a subject, and in cinema, where the authorial subject is diffused through multiple sites of writing-direction-production. And each of these textual forms provides poles of identification— whether a character, a speaking position, or a refrain— whereby a reader/viewer may invest a certain self in another. Whilst the self may be understood to be produced rather than a given in each case, the means of its production in such forms as the sonnet, the seven-volume semi-autobiographical roman à clef and the road movie cannot coincide. Neither can the purpose of that production or its effect. The stakes of selfhood are different in each case.

Such non-coincidences— disciplinary and generic— can be revealing. An opportunity to explore them was provided by the 11th Annual International Conference of the Australian Society of French Studies, held in Brisbane and Ipswich in July 2003. The conference theme— "Soi-disant: Writing, Screening, Theorizing the Self in French"— brought together work from the broad range of disciplinary approaches available in French studies (literary, linguistic, historical, philosophical, postcolonial, visual arts, cultural studies, cinema studies, queer studies, translation studies). The present volume is drawn from these offerings at what turned out to be the largest ASFS gathering to date, attracting a broad range of international and Australian-based scholars.

It was evident from the outset— indeed it was our purpose as convenors— that there would be quite different responses to the theme, different takes on what "soi-disant" might represent. Clearly, in some quarters, autobiography was seen as central to the conference, to the extent of glossing the event as an "autobiography conference". Life-writing was seen as the template for the writing of the self. Others saw the relationship between self and discourse as the linchpin, while still others anticipated that theorizations of identity and difference would be pivotal. The mismatches in expectations turned out to be productive, dislodging one focus from a position of centrality.

Having cast our net widely, we were delighted by the variety of papers offered, and then by the ways in which delegates made the papers work together. The level of interest and the quality of contributions have resulted in two collections of papers.

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2 De Nooy, Hardwick & Hanna

3 Soi-disant


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7 Together with Anne Freadman, our co-convenor, we gratefully acknowledge the financial support for the conference from the University of Queensland (School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, Contemporary Studies Program, Ipswich Campus, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research) and Queensland University of Technology (Centre for Social Change Research). We also thank Carmen McNaught for all her contributions to the success of the conference.
The practicalities of publishing mean that, despite the felicities of cross-fertilization enacting at the conference, as editors we have been obliged to produce a thematic division between the two volumes. Those papers engaging explicitly with the notions of autobiography and life-writing as they are conventionally understood are enacted at the conference, as editors we have been obliged to produce a thematic division between the two volumes. Those papers engaging explicitly with the Navarre, Catherine Pozzi, Marie Bashkirtseff and Amélie Nothomb, and on literary tradition to an analysis of the role of intertextuality in diary-writing to the pursuit of from a refutation of the myth that Maghreb literature lacks an autobiographical clues playfully hidden in formally constrained texts.

None of the texts analyzed in the present issue of AJPS, on the other hand, would fit Philippe Lejeune’s landmark definition of l’auto-biographie – “le récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu’un fait de sa propre existence, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité” – and most not even remotely. Nonetheless, whether lyric poetry, fictional diaries, literary criticism, road movies or contributions to internet debate, they each articulate a self or selves. And taken together they make a persuasive argument for being attentive to the ways in which over-arching concerns, we present a corpus that nuances the story of the fragmentation of the coherent self. What emerges from the juxtaposition of these texts is the importance of the subject, whether the “je” of the text or the focus of narrative identification, of genre in determining the version of identity presented. That is to say, the instance is largely determined by generic conventions for writing/producing the self and of deliberate modification. In publishing them as a collection, we make no claims to be unveiling here a theoretization of the self, c. 2003, which would rise from the ashes of its predecessors. Rather, and despite the recurrence of certain patterns and concerns, we present a corpus that nuances the story of the fragmentation of the self. What emerges from the juxtaposition of these texts is the importance of genre in determining the version of identity presented. That is to say, the instance of the subject, whether the “je” of the text or the focus of narrative identification, is largely determined by generic conventions for writing/producing the self and for formulating identity. For example, the possibilities of creating a “je” through the constraints of a Metro poem – where the “je” is determined as one in transit through the Parisian underground – mean that such a “je” cannot coincide with the “je” of a personal diary, even if both texts present apparently mundane details of their narrators’ everyday lives.

Rather than “deliberate modification” – the term used by Freadman and Macdonald, quoted above – “meddling” is the word Ross Chambers uses to describe the processes by which the self is “ex-centred” in lyric poetry. Meddling with the conventions of verse creates the space between the writing subject, producer of the poem, and the written subject, a “je” displacing the poet, a meddled-with self. Such a mediated subject is not restricted to poetry, but is evident in the various genres studied in this collection of essays. Chambers equally points to the reading self as split and transformed in this process: as readers we are othered through poetry, through fiction, if we are made to think as we have not thought before. If each of the four poems studied by Chambers interferes with genre conventions so as to ex-centre the subject, his point is equally that they do not do so in the same way. He distinguishes between inversion in Verlaine (inversion of metrical and rhyming constraints contributing to the instability of the subject), extension in de Noailles (both self and lines of verse extended in time), intersection in Baudelaire (chiasmic lines, selves fusing as they cross) and even evacuation in the Metro poems of Jouet (a trajectory of the self just traceable in an inventory of impressions). Anne-Christine Royère adds “délucation” to this list in her analysis of Henri Michaux’s poetry: a voice, at first affirmed by repetition (rhyme, metre, punctuation), lapses, dissolves into visual and aural rhythms. If the subject appears absent, however, it nonetheless appears. Here we see the impossibility of eliminating the self, when that self is interpreted as the subject of enunciation: I enunciate therefore I am. Chambers notes an “evacuation of subjectivity that doesn’t go unsigned”, tracking Jouet’s “je” through the Metro as he reacts to his fellow passengers and notes down the stations through which he passes; Royère’s analysis of Michaux’s “unités respiratoires” allows the reader to hear the breathing of the invisible man.

Katja Haustein similarly identifies a self that is at once maintained and dissolved, but the subject in this case is inscribed in prose, and at a length that considerably raises the stakes of sustaining the ephemeral. The Proustian self, she argues, is neither modern nor quite postmodern in achieving a strangely unstable persistence. The figure for the production of this permanence-through-alteration is curiously not writing but rather photography. Photography in A la recherche does not fix and conserve, but alters in the etymological sense (rendre autre), introduces alterity into the familiar. Thus Marcel is unrecognizable in the portrait of the child. This too is a form of meddling, of intervention, and accompanies another: the mediation of the self through exposure to the other. The Proustian œuvre, Haustein suggests, is not nearly as narcissistic as critics have inferred: the narrating self is crucially mediated – othered – through the quite different relationships to his grandmother and to lover Albertine.

The fashioning of the self through the encounter with the other carries pleasures and risks, with risk often being part of the pleasure. The process may involve incorporation of the other: a heady infusion in the Baudelaire poem analyzed by Chambers, where the sudden intimacy of intersection expands the subject as

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it fuses subjectivities; a movement of identification or a desire for possession in Proust. A further permutation is explored in our next paper. Already apparent in Haustein’s reading of Proust, the potential for loss of self, the danger of dissolving into the other, is highlighted in Jutta Fortin’s reading of Maupassant’s “Le Horla”, in which incorporation gives way to invasion. Fortin examines the failed project of selfhood represented by the (fictional) diary in the 1887 version of “Le Horla”. If diary-writing is often viewed as therapeutic, as a means of consolidating the autonomous subject, Fortin demonstrates how the act of writing the self can turn against the writer. Rather than providing comfort and a basis for psychological security (in the manner of a transitional object), the diary in “Le Horla” confirms the existence of a hostile other, eroding and ultimately overwhelming the narrator such that he suicidés, and thus ceases to write. Not only does this fictional diary fail to provide a scaffolding for its subject, but writing the self in this case leads to the death of its author.

Caroline Sheaffer-Jones sheds light on the notion of failure in the writing of the self by ascribing it to a particular reading position. This position is occupied by Maurice Blanchot, who seeks a relation to the truth of self in Virginia Woolf’s writings and finds it lacking. No unifying vision emerges. In her death, on the other hand, he finds a fidelity to the self he could not discern in her work. In striking contrast with Fortin’s reading of self-destruction in “Le Horla”, he reads Woolf’s suicide not as the annihilation of the self but as its culmination, its point of revelation, the point at which her elusive life can finally be grasped in a moment of coherence. Sheaffer-Jones traces Blanchot’s judgements of failure and triumph to the kind of nostalgia for self-presence critiqued by Derrida. And yet nostalgia does not become the drawstring by which she could gather together a unifying vision of Blanchot. For although Blanchot’s criticism insistently promotes a teleological view of selfhood, his own fiction together with a letter about his past provide a different perspective on the self, one that connects with Woolf’s images of life as scattered instants. Derrida’s reading of Blanchot provides a model for viewing death not as a totalizing moment at the end of life, but as traversing its every moment.

The narratives of failure highlighted by Fortin and Sheaffer-Jones both concern the failure, not of the self per se, but of its consolidation. When the aim is stability and self-possession, otherwise can only intrude, movement can only mislead. The prospect of failure is thus inherent in the nostalgic project. And yet Haustein’s article suggests that Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu, the work that epitomizes the nostalgic quest for the lost self, sidesteps the abyss, finds a way out of the impasse. It does so, she argues, through persistent alteration, through a rhythm of change creating the illusion of continuity. The tightrope walk, the balancing act between maintaining and dissolving the self, ceases to represent the risky approach and reveals itself instead as the path to survival. The intersection with otherwise preserves the self as it gambles with it.

Shifting from considering writing the self to screening the self, in the next two papers, we see how the very medium in which the story is told circumscribes, or more appropriately, projects, the particular kind of self produced. For while the written self tends to foreground the idea of self as consciousness, the screened selves presented in this collection remind us of the importance of the corporeal dimension of subjectivity. These two cinematic selves – Rémi in Les Corps ouverts and Félix in Drôle de Félix – are bodies projected into space and bodies constantly on the move, a visual reminder of the fluidity and elusiveness of the identity categories attributed to these characters, indeed, of the concept of identity itself.

Tensions between the sustaining and the scattering of self, and between teleological and open-ended readings, are once again evident in the first of these two papers, Joe Hardwick’s article on Les Corps ouverts. The film depicts the meanderings of a marginalized protagonist, and tends to be read as a quest for an affirmed gay identity. Arrival, however, in terms of both place and self, is uncertain. As in Sheaffer-Jones’s paper, the temptation to interpret this as failure is linked to a certain kind of reading. Hardwick cites reviewers who ask that the film comply with the conventions of the coming out narrative, as they demand that the main protagonist, Rémi, choose his declared sexuality. Rémi, by refusing to settle down into a recognized category of identity, can only be seen as confused. The imbroglio of character identity and the film’s generic identity becomes clear when the film is read in terms of “loitering” genres emphasizing repetition rather than linear trajectories. Hardwick’s analysis, placed in the context of the identification of a generation of les jeunes cinéastes français (also reproached for their failure to comply with standard narratives of growth into mature stability), suggests that instability of the self is in fact the point.

Murray Pratt’s article fits closely with Hardwick’s; again the central character is itinerant, and again the film could be said to be meddling with genre, in that it flirts with different generic possibilities, thereby offering different templates for the interpretation of identity. Hence here too, the understanding of the film’s genre identity determines the understanding of the protagonist’s identity. Pratt shows that Drôle de Félix is widely read as affirmation cinema, producing a feel-good self (Félix as character and as object of viewer identification) whose marginalization as HIV positive, gay and beur is of little consequence in everyday life. Reading the film as a road movie, on the other hand, produces a contesting self that rewrites normative relations.

From the incarnate, we turn to the disembodied, in Barbara Hanna’s paper, “Face Off”. If Chambers’ paper opens this volume with a putative revolution announced by Flaubert, with an impassioned declaration from Mallarmé, this final contribution shows that just over a century later, generic innovation can still produce frissons. It is written against a background of technological innovation which has made possible a new mode of communication, that of interaction on Internet discussion sites. A recurrent trope in discussion about computer-mediated
communication — apparently ignoring the considerable history of written and telecommunication that preceded it10 — is the possibility of the fabrication of identity. Hanna shows that meddling with the self, here as elsewhere, is tied up with generic stakes, and the stakes in current affairs discussion are the validation of one’s argument in debate. Accusations of fakery are relatively rare in this genre, but this does not mean the self is not variable. Rather, self-presentation is re-purposed for different debates — an important skill for language learners to acquire.

From Chambers’ discussion of the meddling that opens a gap between writing and written selves, we understand that the ex-centric subject is never produced in isolation. “Le Horla” suggests that the textual mediation of the self may produce a written self that is so ex-centric as to be alien to the writing self. But if the self may be produced as other it is almost always produced for the other, the destinataire of the text. Hanna’s article makes transparent this process, highlighting the role of the interlocutor in the production of the textual self.

The Internet was conceived as a decentred technology, as a medium of communication not dependent on a physical centre. As such it appears to facilitate the fullest extension of the ex-centric self, a self roaming further than the protagonists of the films or the “je” of the Metro poem. Internet communication produces ephemeral subjectivities, formed through interaction with multiple others, manifest only for as long as the exchanges that creates them. And yet, one could argue that this is the case of textuality in general: the detours of the Metro ride undertaken in Chambers’ company included Michigan and Brisbane, and whilst Proust’s tomes are carefully conserved, their subject is no less fleeting in Haustein’s view.

If the analyses in this volume seem to move from highly formalized genres (such as metrical poetry) to the apparent freedom of Internet musings, in fact all the genres presented are shown to be constrained in some way. The selves discernible in these texts thus both derive from and are subject to generic imperatives. And playing — meddling — with these constraints produces new, or altered, genres and selves. The possibility of constancy through constant alteration — that is, literally, self-sameness, self-identity — is as important to conceptions of genre identity as it is to ideas of individual identity. Both can be seen as sets of recurrent practices, as Freadman and Macdonald have argued in the case of genre and Judith Butler in the case of gender identity and of identity more generally.11 Both are subject to what Derrida called the logic of iterability: it is constant repetition of the practices of genre and of identity that gives the impression of their enduring existence, but the very same repetition also produces variation and innovation.

10 Ignoring too, as Hanna points out, the considerable potential for manipulating identities in face-to-face communication.