

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

# Aesthetics



## and the Dimensions of the Senses

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## and the Dimensions of the Senses



**Simone Heidbrink / Nadja Miczek**

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## **VIRTUALLY EMBODYING THE FIELD**

### **SILENT ONLINE BUDDHIST MEDITATION, IMMERSION, AND THE CARDEAN ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD<sup>1</sup>**

GREGORY PRICE GRIEVE

“Information does not simply represent a body or corporeal experience; it renders the emergent properties and capacities of bodies.”

Anna Munster (2006, 180).

“By using the body in different ways, I stumbled on (but never fully assimilated) practices distinct from my own.”

Robert Desjarlais (1992, 27).

On December 12, 2008, about a year into my ethnography of Buddhist communities on Second Life, I received an email reminder that 20 minutes of silent mediation was going to start at the Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat.<sup>2</sup> Second Life is a 3D immersive virtual world, in which users control avatars that are able to create content as well as make their own list of friends, join or create groups, and communicate using chat, instant messaging or voice.<sup>3</sup> As of August 13, 2010, Second Life had over twenty million registered accounts, and 1,373,248 residents had logged in during the last thirty days. The Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat is part of a Buddhist community on Second Life that consists of five groups, and as of January 2010, had 2,756 members, five regions, and held approximately 85 events a week. For these Zen groups, while they engage in a wide range of activities, from Dharma talks to camp fire concerts, the most important practice is silent online meditation.

The email’s ‘ping’ took my attention out of the word processing document in which I was entangled, and I became aware of what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the ‘hurly-burly’ background: “the music playing in my

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<sup>1</sup> This essay “rezzed” during “How Virtual is the Real? Research into Digital Worlds,” held at Jacobs University, North Bremen, Germany in August 2010. I would like to thank the students, organizers and other researchers, especially Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Simone Heidbrink, Ann-Kathrin Gaida, David Morgan, and Christopher Helland for their insights.

<sup>2</sup> Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat is a pseudonym . . . Whether to use an informant’s real name or to use a pseudonym is one of the most challenging choices an ethnography has to make . . . There is no universal rule and it needs to be decided on a case-by-case basis. This choice becomes even more difficult, when one is doing research in virtual worlds where the people already have anonymity because their avatars have different names from their real life selves . . . In this article, when the data was gathered from publically published documents such as websites, groups or note cards, I used the actual avatar’s name (but not their real life name), and the actual name of the groups . . . When the data was gathered from interviews, surveys or participant observation I used pseudonyms for avatar’s names, regions and groups.

<sup>3</sup> See Second Life <http://secondlife.com/>. Retrieved 15 August 2010.

office, hum of the air conditioner, and a slight trembling from the train rattling by a few blocks away”.<sup>4</sup> I logged onto the Second Life Viewer program much as one would a web browser, such as Safari or Firefox.<sup>5</sup> After typing in my name and password, my avatar materialized in my home in Second Life. I, or at least my avatar - a stern looking man in Buddhist monk robes - stood on the porch of my Second Life home overlooking a sunset on a rocky ocean coast. While once just the dreams of science fiction, logging onto virtual worlds located in cyberspace and housed on the Internet has become a commonplace occurrence for millions of users around the globe.<sup>6</sup> Yet, while a common occurrence, it still raises many questions. What are the mediated practices that enable ‘logging on’? What does it mean to ‘be’ in a virtual world such as Second Life? What is the ‘shock experience,’ to borrow a phrase from the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, “of leaping into the alternative worlds created by dreams, theater, visual culture, play and cyberspace”?<sup>7</sup> And what method is best suited for studying religion in virtual worlds such as Second Life?

Such questions lead to the Cardean Virtual Research Team (CVRT)’s ethnographic fieldwork of Second Life’s Buddhist community. The Cardean Virtual Research Team, which in its final form consisted of the principle investigator, four advanced undergraduates and one graduate student, will have conducted research between February 2008 and September 2010. While the research was conducted almost entirely within the virtual world of Second Life, the Cardean Virtual Research Team employed a classic ethnographic method consisting of Malinowski’s ([1961]1922) practices of participant observation and Clifford Geertz’s (1973) thick description.<sup>8</sup> During our fieldwork we explored temples, prostrated before Buddha images, went to Dharma talks, and argued in open discussions about the nature of Buddhism. Our research hinged, however, on participant observation of online silent meditation (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Wittgenstein 1980, 97.

<sup>5</sup> See Safari, <http://www.apple.com/safari/>. Retrieved 15 August 2010; Mozilla <http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/firefox.html>. Retrieved 15 August 2010.

<sup>6</sup> In 2007 comScore estimated that 271 million people play online games each month (see Worldwide Online Gaming Community Reaches 217 Million People, [http://www.comscore.com/Press\\_Events/Press\\_Releases/2007/07/Worldwide\\_Online\\_Gaming\\_Grows](http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2007/07/Worldwide_Online_Gaming_Grows). Retrieved 19 August 2010). . . For the two most influential Science fiction books see Gibson 2004 and Stephenson 1992.

<sup>7</sup> See Schutz 1962, 231.

<sup>8</sup> See Grieve & Heston 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For a video clip of silent online meditation see Just Sitting Online, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Y4ij0xG5k>. Retrieved 15 August 2010.

Figure 1: Buddhist silent online mediation at Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat.



Often posed as the essence of Zen Buddhist practice, and definitely understood as the heart of Zen by the majority of Second Life practitioners, the aim of Zen Buddhist silent meditation, or *zazen*, is just sitting.

Can one ‘just sit’ online? While we never doubted the validity of doing ethnography in Second Life, we often ran up against skeptics. Just a little over a decade ago, the anthropologist James Clifford declared in “Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century”, that such online ethnographic studies were at best ‘awkward’. “What if someone studied the culture of computer hackers [...] and in the process never ‘interfaced’ in the flesh?”<sup>10</sup> He answers that, while he believes that such an online study passes the dual test of length-of-stay and interactivity, for most anthropologists such ‘disembodied’ research would still not be “currently acceptable as fieldwork” (ibid). What seems to be missing for most scholars from online virtual worlds is ‘immersion’ - the sense that you are ‘there’. Immersion creates an experience of locatedness “in which an individual perceives himself or herself as being present or having ‘presence’”.<sup>11</sup>

Clifford’s work, even if dated, exposes the shortcomings of current studies that claim people are immersed in virtual worlds because of sensorial realism or collective projects.<sup>12</sup> Instead, as I argue here through the lens of silent online meditation, what makes ethnography possible in worlds such as Second Life is ‘virtual embodiment.’ When logged onto such places as Second Life, while one’s fingers type on the keyboard, one is also ‘virtually embodied’ in a transversal world. I am not arguing the untenable position that somehow, as in the movie *Tron* (1982), one drags one’s physical body into cyberspace. Instead, using Judith Butler’s understanding of the body as practice, I maintain that a theory of virtual embodiment differentiates immersion as performance from immersion as a proprioceptive sensation. In such a case, virtual embodiment can be defined as an immersed bodily performance that occurs in cyberspace.

A theory of virtual embodiment is significant to the study of online religion in three ways. First, virtual embodiment shows why ethnography is possible in cyberspace, and allows for the construction of models to

<sup>10</sup> See Clifford 1997, 61.

<sup>11</sup> See Blasovich 2002, 129.

<sup>12</sup> See Boellstorff 2008; Golub 2010.

explain online identity and community (particularly what I have called residents and cloud communities).<sup>13</sup> Second, virtual embodiment illuminates why virtual worlds, either 3D graphic or textual platforms, are distinct areas of research compared to other online environments such as web pages and blogs. I am not arguing that virtual worlds are dichotomized, and radically different from other online media, but rather that they have a higher degree of virtual embodiment and thus deserve a different method of study. Third, virtual embodiment illustrates that religion—even virtual religion—does not just happen in people’s minds but requires bodies, and thus exposes these bodies as ‘a cultural sign’.<sup>14</sup> Virtual embodiment indicates that the Body is not a preexisting stable platform on which one inscribes an identity, but rather a condensation of performances, feelings and desires grounded in lived practices.

To make this argument the paper proceeds as follows. First, it theorizes the virtually embodied field. Because the Cardean Virtual Research Team conducted some of the first ethnography in Second Life, we found ourselves facing a two-sided methodological problem. We had to theorize the virtual and its relation to the actual, while simultaneously creating practices for an effective ethnographic method. Named after the Roman Goddess, Cardea, our method uses the model of a hinge to theorize the virtual as desubstantialized and the worlds opened up by cyberspace as nondualistic. Second, the paper describes the virtually embodied field through the concepts of ‘resident’ and ‘cloud community.’ A ‘resident’ defines that social entity, both cultural and legal, that weaves together an avatar and its user within the broader social context of the cyberworld. A ‘cloud community’ defines an online group that is temporary, flexible, elastic and is inexpensive in the social capital required to join or to leave. Third, utilizing Judith Butler’s theory of Gender, we define the virtual body as a ‘stylized repetition of acts,’ which is both constrained and constituted by cultural and historically specific norms. Finally, the paper defines virtual embodiment as the subjectification that occurs to a body lived in cyberspace.

*Theorizing the Virtually Embodied Field: The Cardean Method as a  
Desubstantialized and Nondualistic Model*

After logging onto Second Life, the actual world receded and I became aware of ‘being’ my avatar. I was no longer just typing on the keyboard, but also aware of standing on the porch of my home in Second Life. I looked at the map and could tell that a number of people were already sitting at the nearby *zendo* or meditation hall. It was too far to walk, and one cannot fly in this region, so I teleported over. I ‘rezzed’ (materialized) in front of a wooden building, through the glass doors of which I could see a long wooden altar with incense, candles, flowers and a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. I pushed through the door and

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<sup>13</sup> See Grieve & Heston 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Butler 1990, 90.

greeted everyone with a *gassho*, a gesture of palms together and fingers pointing upwards in prayer position. Typically in the virtual Buddhist communities that I studied, during silent meditation between ten and twenty Second Life residents sit on virtual cushions and sitting mats (*zafus* and *zabutons*). On this day, I was welcomed with the word “namaste” by many of the sixteen practitioners, who run the gamut from those dressed in Zen monastic garb, to those who look like they should be out clubbing, to elves, one Gorean, and a small goat-like animal. The avatars are being controlled by people, who, like me, are currently logged onto Second Life. They could be located in the same room, as I, or they could be on another continent.

Can one conduct ethnography in such a virtual and highly mediated community? Can ethnographers telecommute? Can one be immersed in other worlds while sitting in front of a computer screen? As Malinowski cautioned, researchers should not sit in their armchairs theorizing from a distance, but must spend time learning about, and from, groups of people in their natural surroundings.<sup>15</sup> Because of virtual embodiment we found Second Life to be a valid ethnographic field. We found that the chief reason for the reluctance of others to see cyberspace as a valid site of ethnographic research is because the virtual is assumed to be fake, and thus one is considered to not really *be there*. Yet, the distinction between ‘armchair’ and ‘field’ is breaking down. The myth of the ethnographic field as a discreet, bounded geographic locale is proving to be increasingly outdated and untenable as globalization and mediation blur the boundary between ‘here’ and ‘there’.<sup>16</sup> In fact, a ‘field site’ can no longer be seen merely as a physical location, but rather must be viewed as the intersection between people, practices, and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual.

The assumption of unreality and its lack of immersion leads to three dominant models of the virtual in contemporary computer-driven cyberspace<sup>17</sup> (Table 1).

Table 1: Theories of the Virtual, models of its relation to the actual, and corresponding conception of the nature of cyberspace

	<b>Theories of the Virtual</b>	<b>Relation with the actual</b>	<b>Conception of Cyberspace</b>
<b>Correspondence</b>	Simulation of the actual	Ludicrous	Space of gaming
<b>Suppletion</b>	Substitution for the actual	Utopic	Space of realization
<b>Apocalyptic</b>	Extermination of the actual	Dystopic	Space of addiction
<b>Cardean (the Hinge)</b>	Desubstantialization of the actual	Nondualistic	Space of transversality

<sup>15</sup> See Malinowski [1961]1922, 7.

<sup>16</sup> See Kohn 1995; Fox 1991; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, 5.

<sup>17</sup> See Doel & Clarke 1999, 261-283.

The first model, based on the correspondence theory of representation, maintains that the virtual is a simulation, a false approximation of the real. That is, that virtual online mediation is at best a pale imitation of actual world practices. The correspondence model tends to see the virtual communities as ludicrous (a word stemming from Latin term *ludus*, meaning game), and causes people to dismiss such cyberspace as a place of play. The second model, an inversion of the first, is the suppletion of the real, where the virtual substitutes for what is partial, lacking, and imperfect in the actual world. In this case, many are unable to meditate in the actual world - one could be physically disabled or agoraphobic - and the virtual allows one to realize one's desire. The suppletion model often breeds utopic narratives about users finding their true selves, true communities, or both, through the use of different online genders and even species. The suppletion theory sees cyberspace as a place of realization. In the third, apocalyptic model, the virtual creates a "resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality [which causes] the extermination of the real by its double".<sup>18</sup> For example, it gives rise to the notion that, because people may spend so much time meditating in the virtual world, they cease to meditate in the real one. The apocalyptic model tends to generate dystopic narratives of the destruction of users' actual world lives, and breeds tales of addiction.

These three theories, however, are based on a notion of the virtual as that which *seems* to be there as opposed to what is actually there<sup>19</sup>. The virtual, then, denotes a distinction of 'almost so'. This understanding arose because the virtual is tethered to interactive computer systems which are highly mediated. In other words, to more clearly see the virtual we need to disambiguate it from two currently intertwined concepts: 'Internet' and 'cyberspace.' The 'Internet' denotes the hardware and software that comprise a global system of interconnected computer networks. The Internet originated in California in 1969 with the ARPANET, which was funded by the United States Department of Defense, and as of today an estimated quarter of the Earth's population has access to it.<sup>20</sup> 'Cyberspace' on the other hand, denotes the mediated social space created by interconnected electronic communications. It differs from telecommunication, which has a sender and a receiver, in that cyberspace occurs in a third virtual social environment.<sup>21</sup> Linked to the Internet, cyberspaces enable interactive immersive environments that put a user in contact with other residents of digital worlds and offer a new place and form of socialization.<sup>22</sup> Such worlds can be textual, as in newsgroups, chat rooms and MUDs, or can use computer graphics to render 3D models as in Second Life.

Too often virtual worlds are described as if they were something created whole cloth by these digital networks. Yet, being immersed in virtual worlds is nothing new. For instance, being immersed in a good novel, or in a film, or even a well-told story, can be understood as forms of the virtual. In fact, it can be

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<sup>18</sup> See Baudrillard 1996, 25.

<sup>19</sup> See Rheingold 1991, 177.

<sup>20</sup> See Hafner & Matthew, 1996.

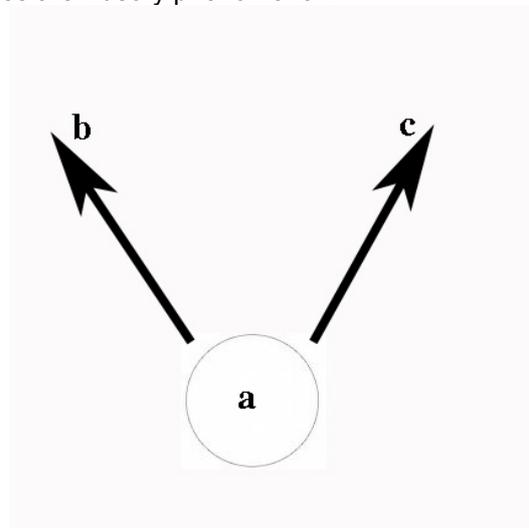
<sup>21</sup> See Krueger 1991.

<sup>22</sup> See Rheingold 1992.

argued that virtual worlds have followed human culture from its very beginning.<sup>23</sup> As Michel Serres writes in his book *Atlas*: “[i]magination, memory, knowledge and religion are the vectors of virtualization that have enabled us to leave this ‘there’ long before the appearance of computerization and digital networks”.<sup>24</sup> Nor are virtual worlds dependent on cyberspace. For example, Margaret Wertheim argues that Giotto’s Arena Chapel in Padu transported viewers out of reality into an architecturally virtual space. She argues that Giotto’s work “blur[s] the boundary between the virtual space of the image and the physical space of the chapel”.<sup>25</sup>

If one disambiguates ‘virtual’ from ‘cyberspace’ one finds that virtualities are neither ‘fake’, nor immaterial, but rather are desubstantialized. That is, the virtual cannot be reduced to material or ideal, but is a set of processes dependent on the actual, and realized in it, but irreducible to a physical system. In such a case, the virtual, as Pierre Lévy argues in “[Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?](#)” “has little affinity with the false, the illusory or imaginary. Nor does it mean the opposite of reality”.<sup>26</sup> For instance, the experience created by watching a film is dependent on the physical celluloid but its significance cannot be reduced to it. If one sees the virtual as desubstantialized, a fourth model appears. This can be theorized as the hinge, which models the virtual world and the actual as nondualistic (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Hinge. If virtual worlds are theorized as desubstantialized, then the experience (a) of the relationship between the virtual (b) and actual (c) is not one of real and unreal, but rather nondualistic. Nondualism indicates that things appear distinct while not being separate, and affirms the understanding that while distinctions exist, dichotomies are illusory phenomenon.



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<sup>23</sup> See Fornäs et al 2002, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Lévy 1998, 28.

<sup>25</sup> See Wertheim 1999, 76.

<sup>26</sup> See Lévy 1995.

Nondualism indicates that things appear distinct while not being separate, and affirms the understanding that while distinctions exist, dichotomies are illusory phenomena. For instance, a virtual body is distinct from an actual body, but there is no essential difference between them. They are both cultural practices. The hinge places you in two worlds at once, and causes one to be transversal. That is, perception of the virtual pivots in two or more intersecting but parallel social positions. In fact, virtualization impedes us from thinking in schemes of binary dichotomies and in dialectic notions of synthesis.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of the Cardean ‘Hinge’ model, while actual embodiment and virtual embodiment are distinct, they cannot be dichotomized as real and simulated. Instead, both are *real*, because the virtual and the actual produce an effect.<sup>28</sup> This notion of ‘effect’ is illuminated by the word’s etymology that derives from the Latin *virtus*, which means power, efficacy and can be traced back to *vir*, manliness, excellence, and virtuousness (as in virility). As Charles Sanders Peirce writes, “A virtual X (where X is a common noun) is something, not an X, which has the efficiency (*virtus*) of an X ...”<sup>29</sup>

#### *Describing The Virtually Embodied Field: Second Life’s Buddhist Residents and Cloud Communities*

Following mouse and keyboard instructions one can explore Second Life, which includes 3D builds such as the Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat’s meditation hall. One can communicate with other residents via voice and built-in public chat and instant messaging. Residents can buy and make clothes, objects, and buildings, as well as buy and rent property. One can conduct businesses using the inworld currency the Linden, run non-profit and educational groups, role-play, and socialize in any number of ways. When I asked Second Life residents how they would describe the virtual world, most would reply like Fae Lilac, who laughed and said, “You have to experience it for yourself to really understand it” (personal communication May 15, 2009). Others described it as a “SIM[ulation],” or a multi-user platform such as World of Warcraft in which you take on an assumed persona and interact with other players. Night Jones said, “think of a peaceful Warcraft without fees” (personal communication May 23, 2009). Most residents wanted to stress Second Life’s unique social network. As Dawn Light said, “I usually liken [Second Life] to something between a video game and a chat room. [...] .[Yet in] Second Life there is no game, in fact no particular plan at all, and is up to each person’s imagination” (personal communication May 23, 2009).

To articulate the ‘native’ perspective, Second Life can be seen as a virtually embodied field that can be analyzed through the categories of residents and cloud communities. These categories are illuminated through the Buddhist concepts of *anātman* and *sangha*. Because it opens up and extends the notion of self, the

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<sup>27</sup> See Nuesselder 2006, 35.

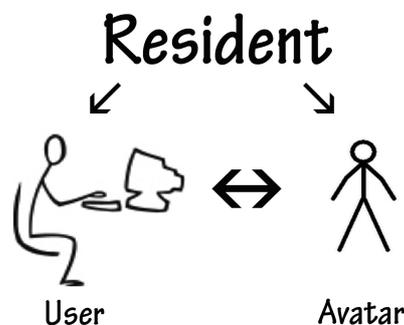
<sup>28</sup> See Lévy 1998, 30.

<sup>29</sup> See Peirce 1902, 763, cited in Nuesselder 2006, 34.

Buddhist concept of *anātman* illuminates how subjectification works on Second Life. *Anātman*, which can roughly be translated as ‘not-self’, is a doctrine that holds that there is no permanent, integral, autonomous subject. The idea of self that one clings to, one’s personality and ego, are temporary creations which are dependant and interpenetrated by others. From a Buddhist perspective, online selves are not copies, simulations or fake. Instead they extend the self into new social spaces. In Second Life users assume an identity by creating an online character—an ‘avatar’. In computing, an avatar is the on-screen representation of the user(s), which can be a three-dimensional model such as in Second Life, a two-dimensional icon as used in many chat forums, or a textual description as used in MUDS (Multi-User Dungeon). In Second Life, the default avatar shape is humanoid, but it can be customized through a graphical user interface that can modify gender, body shape, skin, hairstyle and clothes. Moreover, one can purchase or create bodies and clothes as well as attachments, animation and sonic (voice) overrides. Such customization results in male, female and androgynous human avatars, as well as animal, robot, neko, furies and other fantasy creatures such as dragons.

In Second Life a ‘resident’ is that social entity, both cultural and legal, which weaves together an avatar and its user within the broader social context of the cyberworld (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A resident. ‘User’ refers to the actual person ‘behind the keyboard’, ‘avatar’ refers to the online image of a user’s ‘virtual representative’, and ‘resident’ refers to the cybersocial entity that is activated in Second Life by the presence of the avatar, operated by the user, and socialized by interaction with other residents, their avatars, and occasionally the users themselves.



Linden Lab, the makers of the Second Life grid, defines a ‘resident’ as "a uniquely named avatar with the right to log into Second Life, trade Linden Dollars and visit the Community pages".<sup>30</sup> In Second Life residents are governed by terms of service (TOS), which specifically allow users to retain all intellectual property rights in the digital content they create or own in Second Life. In my research I employ the word ‘user’ to refer to the actual person ‘behind the keyboard’, ‘avatar’ to refer to the online image of a user’s ‘virtual representative’, and ‘resident’ to indicate the cybersocial entity that is activated in Second Life by the

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Fetscherin & Lattmann 2007, 8.

presence of the avatar, operated by the user, and socialized by interaction with other residents, their avatars, and occasionally the users themselves. It is important to remember that a ‘resident’ is not always a one-to-one relationship between a real life user and a virtual representation. As with most website user accounts, several avatars might belong to one user, and conversely one avatar might be operated by more than one user sequentially, or in some cases by more than one user at the same time, as in the situation of one avatar controlled by nine disabled persons (AU 2004).

Theoretically, and thinking back to the concept of *anātman*, residents can be understood as cyborg, fluid selves, whose bodies are multiple, and distributed across a number of ‘windows’. As Valentine Daniel argues, selves are signs: “As a semiotic sign [they] are never actual: [they] are always virtual.”<sup>31</sup> Donna Haraway writes that a “cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”.<sup>32</sup> Sherry Turkle uses the metaphor of computer screen windows to illustrate how residents cycle through cyberspace and the actual world.<sup>33</sup> For Turkle, “[t]he self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times”. Instead “The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time.” As Turkle writes, “Now real life itself may be, as one of [her] subjects says, ‘just one more window’”.<sup>34</sup>

Because it extends the notion of community beyond face-to-face interaction, the Buddhist notion of *sangha* helps open up an understanding of communities on Second Life. In Buddhism, community is understood through ‘*sangha*’, a word used to denote a group of monks, the larger community that also includes lay practitioners, and in the most general sense denotes the assembly of all beings on the path to awakening. More generally, the term ‘community’ defines a group that forms relationships over time by interacting on a regular basis around a set of shared experiences – this could be car enthusiasts or the members of a remote mountain village. Over the last 2,500 years Buddhist communities have been shaped and reshaped as they spread throughout Asia. Over the last century, Buddhism has taken new forms in America and other Western locations. Gary Ray’s creation of the “BodhiNet Bylaws” in 1991 introduced “Cyber-sanghas” to the Internet. Over the last decade, the process of online reshaping flowed into virtual worlds such as Second Life.

A ‘cloud community’ is an online group that is temporary, flexible, elastic and is inexpensive in the social capital required to join or to leave. I borrow the notion of the ‘cloud’ from computing where it signifies an architecture in which users access resources online from a host of different servers – Google docs, Blist and Sliderocket would be examples. Cloud computing users do not invest in infrastructure. Instead, they rent what they need when they need it<sup>35</sup> (Figure 4).

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<sup>31</sup> See Daniel & Pugh 1984.

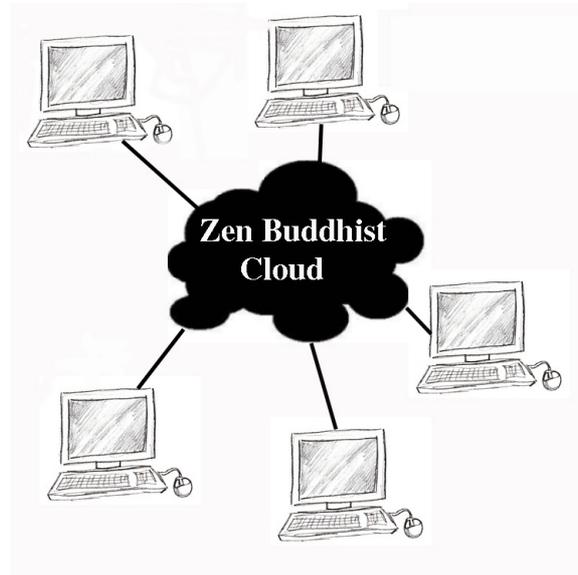
<sup>32</sup> See Haraway 1991, 149.

<sup>33</sup> See Turkle 1984.

<sup>34</sup> See Turkle 1996.

<sup>35</sup> See Barnatt 2008.

Figure 4: Second Life's Zen Buddhist Community Cloud. A 'cloud community' is an online group that is temporary, flexible and elastic. People do not invest, rather they rent what community they need when they need it.



*The Body Which is Not One*

We have defined the virtual as desubstantialized and nondualistic. We have gone on to describe the denizens of the cyberspaces opened up by the Internet as residents, and their associations as cloud communities. We have not, however, answered the more fundamental question: *Where do our bodies go when we log on?* In the Upaya Mountain Zen Retreat's meditation hall are cushions, laid out in semi-circular lines. On December 12, 2008, I walked across the hall, and by clicking on one of the cushions sat in perfect full lotus. Fifteen other people faced the altar with me. There were two cushions facing away from the altar and between them a meditation gong, which is referred to as the 'bell'. Sitting on the right cushion facing away from the altar was the meditation leader or timekeeper who and I quote from information given to me when I was trained for this job "is the person who holds the meditative space for the sitting practice of others." As the time drew near, more people straggled in. Just before the start of the meditation period, the timekeeper typed in public chat: "Please prepare for thirty minutes of silent meditation."

We sat. It is often argued that we leave our bodies behind upon entering virtual worlds. This assumption is sustained by the ideology surrounding virtual worlds which has been continued by a rhetoric of dematerialization. In fact, it is often argued that cyberspace makes the body obsolete. The corollary is also maintained. That is, that online media is a 'body snatcher' which will destroy our bodies<sup>36</sup>. Unlike a Buddhist perspective, both sides of the argument, however, assume (1) a permanent and stable thing called the body;

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<sup>36</sup> See O'Leary 1997.

(2) a split between body and machine, as well as (3) a dichotomy between material and information. All three assumptions map comfortably onto the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, and the even older Christian doctrine of the flesh and soul.

If we do leave our bodies behind, online meditation is particularly problematic for Zen practice, which is often posited as being about direct unmediated experience. As spelled out by Bodhidharma, (the 5th century Indian Buddhist monk who is traditionally credited with bringing Zen to China), what defines Zen is a “special transmission of Buddhism distinct from the teachings, which is not dependent on words or letters.” If this is the case how can you meditate online? Digital immigrants, especially those who have studied Buddhism, already know the easiest answer—online meditation is ludicrous (cf. the Latin “*ludus*” meaning game).<sup>37</sup> For those who have just dipped their toe into the great worldwide ocean of the Web, online meditation cannot help but seem frivolous at best and or ideological at worst. Yet, accusing practitioners of fakery is a little like the French entomologist Antoine Magnan, who argued that bumblebees cannot fly. He forgot to speak with the bumblebee. In other words, more and more people are using new media for Buddhist purposes. At the simplest level, the Internet has made Buddhist scriptures, resources, and databases and journals much more available. Yet, more radically at least since 1998 and the opening of the website “Daily Zen Meditation,” *zazen* itself has been offered online on the World Wide Web.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than declaring the practice ludicrous, online silent meditation should make us reflexively ask, as Judith Butler does in *Subjects of Desire*, “How do we conceive of the body as a concrete scene of cultural struggle?”<sup>39</sup> Following Butler, one should maintain that the body is not so much a thing as a project, a skill, a pursuit, an enterprise, even an industry. As such, the ‘Body’ does not exist, because bodies operate not according to natural and universal laws, but rather to social and historical logics which are unstable and indeterminate and thus whose meaning can never be fixed. The constituted unfixed nature of the body is especially apparent in gender, which as Butler declares in her discussion of drag, becomes evident in dress.<sup>40</sup>

Dress can also show how gender is undone in virtual religious worlds. For instance, in early February 2010, UMZR made available free virtual versions of *kesas*, Zen Buddhist monk robes. When I logged on the day these became available, I came across an almost carnivalesque group helping a female human avatar edit the robes so that they would fit. As a default, the robes had been made for male humans, and there needed to be much editing for them to fit women, and other non-human avatars. This occurrence was not unique. As is clear when looking at fashion on Second Life, there is an unmarked and ubiquitous heteronormativity at the platform’s core. Even in Buddhist regions, which tend to be more equalitarian and are actually usually run by

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<sup>37</sup> Such skepticism is true not only of academics but also those who practice Buddhism. See for instance “Jundo Cohen Dharam Talk Pt. 1” posted December 22, 2009 8:31 PM on Sit-A-Long Archive 2007-2009, <http://www.treeleaf.org/sit-a-long/archive/>. Retrieved 18 August 2010.

<sup>38</sup> For an online Zendo Website see Treeleaf Zendo, <http://www.treeleaf.org/meditation.html>. Retrieved 18 August 2010.

<sup>39</sup> See Butler 1987a, 237.

<sup>40</sup> See Butler 2004, 213.

female avatars, men are usually offered monk robes while women are offered such things as Tibetan tribal costumes. At first this seemed odd to me, because unlike other massive online platforms - such as World of Warcraft, which is created by game designers<sup>41</sup> - almost all of Second Life's content, including bodies, are made by residents (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Bodies for sale on Second Life. Rather than undoing gender, heteronormative practices are often reinforced.



Naively, when I first logged on I assumed that without physical bodies there would be no gender trouble.

What Second Life illustrates is that the virtual body, just like the actual body, is a “stylized repetition of acts.” It is precisely the repetition of acts, gestures and discourses that produce bodies. Butler defines this as “a reiterative and citational practice;” as the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains”.<sup>42</sup> Building on the work of Jacques Derrida, by citation Butler means that it is the repetition of signs that enables one to comprehend a social practice, whether in real life or in a virtual world<sup>43</sup>. The body is the recycling of a “forced recitation of norms” (ibid).

Second Life might seem to confirm a voluntarist ‘theory of gender invention’.<sup>44</sup> It might seem that the ‘I’ that is being bodied somehow precedes the virtual body, and that such a theory stands in conflict with Butler’s notion that the “the body is always already gendered”.<sup>45</sup> Yet, in Second Life avatars are always constrained and constituted by cultural norms, conventions and laws. Just as in the actual world a virtual body

<sup>41</sup> World of Warcraft, <https://us.battle.net/account/creation/wow/signup/>. Retrieved 18 August 2010.

<sup>42</sup> See Butler 1993, 2.

<sup>43</sup> See Derrida 1991; 1993, 13, 226; 1997a, 51.

<sup>44</sup> See Butler 1987b, 139.

<sup>45</sup> See Butler 1989, 255.

employs the historical and cultural norms that define the gender that it ought to be: how it should look, walk, talk, and sit, for example. Just like the actual world, in virtual worlds bodies do not exist outside of culture. In fact, what Second Life exposes is that bodies do not exist except in culturally specific ways of relating to others. As Robert R. Desjarlais writes: "The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine".<sup>46</sup> In such a case, bodies are "an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts".<sup>47</sup> The body is thus a 'doing' – a performance – but not one undertaken by a subject "that might be said to pre-exist the deed".<sup>48</sup>

### *Virtual Embodiment*

To expose how bodies are constituted by public acts in cyberspace, one needs to articulate 'virtual embodiment'. In the most general sense, embodiment signifies the experience of being in one's body, and challenges the assumption that subjectivity – whether virtual or actual – can be reduced to mind. Embodiment lives the body. As Katherine Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman*, the body "can not exist without an embodied creature to enact it."<sup>49</sup> Such embodiment, however, is always contextual, it "never coincides exactly with 'the body', however that normalized concept is understood".<sup>50</sup> Embodiment for Hayles does not require an unceasing attachment to bodies, because embodiment is desubstantialized. "Embodiment cannot exist without a material structure that always deviates in some measure from its abstract representations".<sup>51</sup> In other words, as Hayles argues, the body is a cultural norm, an idealized form, while "embodiment is a specific instantiation... enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture."<sup>52</sup>

The body is the potential of cultural acts, while embodiment is the subjectification that occurs when *doing* a particular body. It is not simply that the body is performed by a subject. Instead, this very "repetition is what enables a subject".<sup>53</sup> Following Foucault, Butler understands this as *assujettissement*, which translates roughly into English as 'subjection' or 'subjectification'.<sup>54</sup> In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler defines subjectification as "the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject."<sup>55</sup> In other words, power activates subjects at the very moment that they are capable of action. Accordingly, as Butler articulates in *Undoing Gender*, "although we need norms in order to live, and to know

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<sup>46</sup> See Desjarlais 1992, 21.

<sup>47</sup> See Butler 1988, 519.

<sup>48</sup> See Butler 1999, 33.

<sup>49</sup> See Hayles 1999, 199.

<sup>50</sup> See Hayles 1999, 196.

<sup>51</sup> See Hayles 1999, 199.

<sup>52</sup> See Hayles 1999, 196.

<sup>53</sup> See Butler 1993, 95.

<sup>54</sup> See Foucault 1988.

<sup>55</sup> See Butler 1997, 2.

what direction to transform our social world [...] we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us.”<sup>56</sup>

Virtual embodiment might seem like a contradiction. John Edward Campbell argues, however, that we need to challenge the “supposition conflating online interaction with bodily transcendence.”<sup>57</sup> To assume that actual-world embodiment is the only real embodiment imputes a naturalist and romantic notion of an unmediated encounter with the world.<sup>58</sup> It assumes that embodiment transcends language. Yet, how we experience living in a body is not given but ideological: “we are also bodies in a social and cultural sense, and we experience that, too.”<sup>59</sup> This notion of the socially constructed nature of bodies is illuminated by people with actual-world disabilities. Since the earliest days of text driven MUDs, scholars have noted the potential for allowing disabled persons to be embodied virtually in non-disabled forms. For instance on Virtual Ability Island, Alice Kruger, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, says that “[in actual] life I’m pretty much confined to my home and this room,” she points out. “I don’t see adults. It’s difficult to go out and talk with people.” She goes on to say that being her avatar is refreshing, “It’s really nice to be able to go out and dance. I love to dance.”<sup>60</sup>

Just as one does actual bodies, one does virtual bodies. They are just more obvious, because virtual worlds make explicit the notion that bodies are not born but constituted through performance. As Butler writes, the body should be conceived not as “natural fact but as an historical idea.”<sup>61</sup> As she maintains in “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” bodying is “a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities,” which involves “a purposive and appropriate set of acts, the acquisition of a skill.”<sup>62</sup> Virtual embodiment is not about corporal manifestations of the body, but rather about immersed performative actions that are constrained by cultural norms. In the simplest sense, a virtual body is one that inhabits virtual reality.<sup>63</sup> Yet, as I argued above, because the virtual is desubstantialized, people in cyberspace are transversal – their bodies can be said to exist both in the virtual and the actual world. In other words, virtual embodiment is not so much about replacement of the actual world body, as it is about the extension of the body into cyberspace.

This is not simple voluntary. For instance, in *Second Life*, while it is possible to subvert the platform’s heteronormativity – and there are some very transgressive examples (Figure 6) – a heteronormative gender matrix is actually more pronounced in *Second Life* than in the actual world.

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<sup>56</sup> See Butler 2005, 206.

<sup>57</sup> See Campbell 2004, 5.

<sup>58</sup> See Graham 2002, 189.

<sup>59</sup> See Ihde, 2002, xi.

<sup>60</sup> “Disabled can have a new ‘real life’ in a virtual world ...”, <http://slenz.wordpress.com/2010/08/10/disability-and-muves---vlenz-update-no-175-august-10-2010/>. Retrieved 19 August 2010.

<sup>61</sup> See Butler 1989, 254.

<sup>62</sup> See Butler 1986, 36.

<sup>63</sup> See Balsamo 2000, 489.

Figure 6: Man-eating-tarantula-woman<sup>64</sup>



One can see this at the level of the platform, where one must choose between being male or female, and also can only have one partner at time.<sup>65</sup> This differs from many earlier MUDS (Multi-User Dungeon) where there is a choice of up to ten genders, and multiple partners. Heteronormativity is also reinforced at the level of resident creations, such as animations, but especially at the level of dress, where there is a clear differentiation between male and female fashion. One can conform to the norm, or one can oppose it. But in choosing what one wears, and thus who one is, even the most oblivious person is forced to take into account the gender implications.

In Second Life, the virtually embodied performance of self is interdependent on three minor factors and one major factor. First, in Second Life one's embodiment is determined by how one appears to others. One can change one's body and shape, which includes gender, race and species. One can also change clothes and accessories. Embodiment is also determined by actions. In Second Life, one can change posture and gestures. When it comes to religious practices, there are many religious gestures such as "Worship the Lord!" and a Heads Up Device (HUD) called the Triple Jewel Hud that allows one to 'gassho' (Figure 7).

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<sup>64</sup> See Woods 2006, 85.

<sup>65</sup> A Second Life partner is a way to designate officially in your avatars profile that you are having a relationship with another resident. See [http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/How\\_do\\_I\\_make\\_someone\\_my\\_partner](http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/How_do_I_make_someone_my_partner). Retrieved 30 August 2010.

Figure 7: Clint using the 'Triple Jewel HUD' to perform a *gassho*.



One can also change one's type of communication, such as in typing in chat or using voice.

The major factor of virtual embodiment occurs when we are interpolated into a social network. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes “[i]n so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose.”<sup>66</sup> The body is never self-present. It is not fixed by nature. Instead, embodiment is created in relation to others, as one is perceived to be a particular sex, race or ethnic group. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment.”<sup>67</sup> This is not to deny the difference between virtual and actual bodies: the actual world ‘skin and flesh’ are vulnerable in ways the virtual body can never be. Still, both in the actual world and the virtual, “[o]ne comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other.”<sup>68</sup> In both the actual world and the virtual world the Body is the “the site where ‘doing’ and ‘being done to’ become equivocal.”<sup>69</sup> Doing and being done occur in virtual worlds through ‘interactivity’, the feeling that one is more than a ‘spectator’, As Allucquère Rosanne Stone argues, in *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?* “Interaction is the physical concretization of a desire to escape the flatness and merge into the created system. It is the sense in which the ‘spectator’ is more than a participant, but becomes both participant in and creator of the simulation”.<sup>70</sup> This interactivity can be a human-human relationship in which one communicates with others, or a human-data relationship created by the manipulation of digital objects and navigation through cyberspace.

<sup>66</sup> See Merleau-Ponty 1962, 440.

<sup>67</sup> See Grosz 1994, 209.

<sup>68</sup> See Butler 1997, 5.

<sup>69</sup> See Butler 2005, 21.

<sup>70</sup> See Stone 1991, 92.

How interactivity generates the norms of virtual embodiment can be seen by looking at two types of Second Life religious communities and their relation to dress. The first, fundamentalism, is a style that chooses to hold fast to inherited and/or ascribed social identity. Often one of the places that fundamentalism is inscribed on the body is the relation between gender and dress, especially women's dress. Such a policing can be seen in the Second Life region "Bible Island", which describes itself as "a neat place where there is all kinds of Bible studies," but warns "PLEASE DRESS MODESTLY." The reason given for this is that "Bible Island is a Family Area where many children watch their parents as they come here to study the Bible." When one teleports in, the first thing one encounters is a sign that reads "Women: do not show any cleavage or stomach. Also, your dress is to be long enough to lap over your knees when you sit down. Men: Wear pants and a shirt that is buttoned up." At the landing point is a teleporter offered for women that sends them to a dressing room. In the Dressing room are a number of dresses that look like something out of *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>71</sup> (Figure 8).

Figure 8: A Christian dress offered at Bible Island (Photo G.P. Grieve).



Along with the dress, on offer are modest undergarment, and flat shoes. No appropriate dress is available for men.

A second religious strategy is 'hybridization', which does not strive for a fixed identity, but rather seeks to distinguish itself from others. One can see this hybridity in Neo-pagan fashion on second life. For instance, The Anam Turas Island Pagan Learning Grove is described as "a place for people to freely find their path of spiritual growth." Such growth is seen to stem from one's inner self. But how do you display this? As one

<sup>71</sup> See Atwood 1985.

pagan said to a Cardean interviewer, “spirituality should not tell you what to wear, but you should dress for magical reasons. If you are going to follow a religion that favors diversity, wear whatever you desire!” Ironically, in this world of individuals, how one marks one’s distinction is by buying into gender norms, and dress plays an important part of this. In such Pagan regions, there are no uniforms or vestments. Rather, vast regions on Second Life are devoted to pagan shopping. One can spend a lot of Linden trying to be distinctive (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Shopping for identity – a Pagan mall on Second Life.



### Conclusion: Virtually Undoing the Body

The sitting period ends with one ring of the bell, followed by a brief. The simplest and most often simply being: "By this merit may all sentient beings attain complete awakening." The timekeeper then types the emoticon “\_/\\_” (for *gassho*). Most of the other people present also type this emoticon into their computers, which causes a cascade of \_/\\_s to flow down the screen. In *Routes*, James Clifford was not necessarily condemning the ethnography of such virtual cloud communities. Instead, he was using the Internet as a litmus test to evaluate anthropologic writing circa 1997 when the piece was published. That is, the keyword in Clifford’s statement might be ‘currently’ One might argue, pointing to works such as Escobar’s *Welcome to Cyberia* (2000[1994]), and Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), and Golub’s *Being in the World (of Warcraft)* (2010), that ethnography has matured and no longer suffers these earlier delusions.

Yet, Clifford's critique of 'awkwardness', even if dated, does point out for many what still seems to be missing from online virtual worlds, namely, 'immersion' – the feeling that you are there. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, after the sitting period had ended, I stood, 'gassho-ed' to the altar, and walked slowly out of the *zendo*. I then said good-bye to my companions, teleported back to my house, and slogged off. I shut down the computer and stood up from my chair. Once again my attention was brought back into the actual world. How should we theorize such practices? Hinging on Second Life's Buddhist online silent mediation, I maintain that what makes ethnography possible in virtual worlds is 'immersion', the sense that you are present in cyberspace. Utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender, I have proven that while sensorial realism and collective projects are important, what makes immersion possible in virtual worlds is virtual embodiment, which can be defined as immersed bodily performances that occur in cyberspace. To articulate how the virtual embodiment operates, this paper has theorized the virtual as a desubstantialized and nondualistic hinge. I described the denizens of these worlds as 'residents', social entities which are woven together from an avatar and its user. We defined their associations as 'cloud communities', groups that are temporary, flexible, elastic and is inexpensive in the social capital required to join or to leave.

Embodying the field is key for ethnography whether conducted in the virtual or actual world. At its best, ethnography is a way of exposing something shared and lived in the everyday world, but which cannot be articulated in linguistic terms. The body is a key site for such analysis. As Robert Desjarlais argues, in *Body and Emotion*, the body allows for experiential understanding of others' worlds, "from the way in which they held their bodies to how they felt, hurt and healed."<sup>72</sup> Often bodies are overlooked in religious practice. This is especially true for online religion, where the study of new media privileges the linguistic, the discursive and cognized over the visceral and tacit. Moreover, a performative understanding of the body resonates with Buddhism, which recognizes neither the mind/body dualism that characterizes much of Western philosophy, nor the concept of an essential self, such as the Hindu *atman*. In Buddhist doctrine, mind and body are both subject to inevitable processes of change.<sup>73</sup>

Virtual embodiment makes it clear that religion does not just happen in people's minds. Even 'belief' is a historically situated bodily practice.<sup>74</sup> I am not arguing for a return to essentialized corporeal notions of the body that use the myth of biology to legitimate gender norms. Instead what virtual embodiment shows is that there is no such thing as a natural or universal body, which is free of history and culture. Moreover, bodies cannot be reduced to experience, mental states, intentionality or to a subject, and are better understood as a set of skills and practices. While embodiment is constituted through social discourses, it resists reduction to

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<sup>72</sup> See Desjarlais 1992, 13.

<sup>73</sup> See Yuasa 1984.

<sup>74</sup> The conception of belief as a bodily practice stemmed from a conversation with Eugene Rogers about the bodily practice of "reading." This notion of belief as a socio-historical artifact is clear in Bellah's seminal chapter: "Religion and Belief: The Historical Background of 'Non-Belief'" (Beyond Belief: 216-229) I would also like to acknowledge Ben Ramsey for pointing out how 'belief' operates as a bodily practice in the film *Jesus Camp* (2006). See the trailer for Jesus Camp at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RNfL6IVWCE>. Retrieved 9 Aug 2010.

linguistic or visual signification. It is not that embodiment is somehow more ontologically fundamental or more natural than other discourses. Rather, because embodiment plays a part in the various processes of awareness, it is a set of skills that we dwell in like a fish in water. Because each of us ‘is’ our body, the cluster of practices that generates embodiment is often uninterpreted, or assumed to be ‘natural’. Virtual embodiment undoes these bodies, by exposing them as ‘a cultural sign’.<sup>75</sup> Virtual embodiment indicates that the body is not a stable platform on which one inscribes an identity, but rather a condensation of performances, feelings and desires grounded in lived practices.

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<sup>75</sup> See Butler 1990, 90.

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