

## The New Digital Cartesianism: Bodies and Spaces in Online Education

Megan Boler  
*Virginia Tech University*

The apparent “disembodiment” created in cyberculture poses a genuine dilemma for critical, feminist and progressive educators. For at least twenty years feminists and other poststructuralists have insisted that the body be recognized as central to the production of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> With significant exceptions, phallogocentric theory since Plato and René Descartes has advocated transcending the body in order to avoid polluting knowledge and truth.<sup>2</sup> Text-based computer-mediated digital culture repackages the Cartesian desire to transcend the body. Whether in the oft-repeated joke “On the internet no one knows you’re a dog,” or the MCI advertisement “There is no race there is no sex there is no infirmity,” this hype heralds a new digital Cartesianism.

In this essay, I compare Descartes’s dream with what manifests itself in digital culture. Despite similarities to Descartes idealized disembodied thinking self, I argue that in digital Cartesianism, ironically the body—although allegedly transcended in virtual environments according to the hypes and hopes—actually functions as a necessary arbiter of meaning and final signifier of what counts as “real” and “true.” Faced with angst about epistemological and ontological illusions, Descartes turned to his faith in God as the source of ideal rationality. In digital Cartesianism, users ironically turn to the body as the final source of epistemological certainty.

The Enlightenment Man of Reason has transmuted into a neo-Liberal self, a singular global consumer whose local and global particularities are erased.<sup>3</sup> Although digital hype—like Descartes’s dream of pure reason—promises that we can transcend the body, I argue that we do not transcend the body but merely reinvoke it in stereotyped ways as I will illustrate in detail further on. Before developing this argument, I outline several paradoxes regarding bodies in-online spaces for education.

### THE EDUCATIONAL DILEMMA

Professor Ingrid Banks argues that her body is a central aspect of the curriculum and pedagogy:

As a black female teaching African-American Studies, I am troubled by the prospect of being asked to teach Online or televised courses. I fear that they would obscure or even erase my presence in the classroom. When I walk into class on the first day of the term, I know that my presence there sends a political message. By standing in front of my students, I challenge not only their conception of the typical—that is, white and male—professor, but also their images of black people.<sup>4</sup>

However, other educators also committed to progressive pedagogies argue that the relative anonymity of online interaction encourages students to participate more freely in dialogue and conversation.<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that student populations who

are often silent in the physical classroom participate more frequently in online environments. Disembodiment may encourage “freedom of expression,” and encourage students to express “politically incorrect” views that need to be discussed openly. As Banks writes,

some colleagues have told me that certain students are willing to say things online that they would not mention in the classroom. Given that I teach sensitive material that challenges students to think critically, the Internet could be a great way of pushing students to discuss why they think the way they do.<sup>6</sup>

Freedom of expression certainly functions as a powerful argument for online education especially in the North American context of first Amendment rhetoric. But there are strong arguments to be made for the value of having these difficult conversations in face-to-face proximity. Banks expresses this clearly:

I don't like the idea of students hiding behind a computer monitor. I want to engage them, and I want them to engage each other, face to face. Over the course of the semester, I want to see their uncomfortable facial expressions and body language change. Of course, some expressions and gestures won't change, which is also information that I want to have.<sup>7</sup>

This educator's concern for embodied pedagogy is widely shared. No doubt, to express “difference” in the absence of “face-to-face” may be less uncomfortable. But is comfort a goal of education? Does disembodiment allow for growth and transformation? Before pursuing this, I detail three ways in which Descartes's dream has morphed into new digital Cartesianism.

#### THE CARTESIAN HYPES AND HOPES

A first point of comparison is the hallmark Cartesian privileging of mind over body. According to Descartes, rational consciousness is not dependent on the body. “The Cartesian knower...being without a body, not only has ‘no need of anyplace’...but actually is ‘no place.’”<sup>8</sup> Freed from the polluting and erring body, a body which is merely a machine, the rational thinker has achieved the will to transcendence. Descartes privileges the human mind as better known to us than the human body. He argues that “the first thing one can know with certainty” is that “man, that is his soul, is a being or substance which is not at all corporeal, whose nature is solely to think.”<sup>9</sup> Very much describing a cyborg discourse, Descartes saw the body as a machine. As Susan Bordo describes, the “body is matter of purely mechanical functioning.”<sup>10</sup>

The enlightenment dream of pure rationality has a direct correlation in digital hype. When William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace” in his cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, cyberspace represented freedom from “meat,” the body and its constraining limits. This disembodied hype is commonly expressed as “online, one can be whomever one wants to be”—that is, online identity is unfettered by the body.

One of the most often repeated claims about virtual reality is that it provides that technological means to construct personal realities free from the determination of body based (“real”) identities...Users are also told that the physical body is of no consequence in virtual worlds....VR is promoted as a body free environment, a place of escape from the corporeal embodiment of gender and race.<sup>11</sup>

However, as I centrally argue, “Cartesianism with a twist” does not escape the body online.

A second point of comparison has to do with the autonomy of the Cartesian Man of reason. The thinking self is autonomous, isolated from other selves and bodies. With Descartes is born the distinctive emphasis on consciousness as a quality located within the private interior space of the mind. Experience is understood as "occurring deeply within and bounded by a self." This new boundary between inner and outer, between self and World, shores up the enlightenment foundation for the autonomous individual. The possibility of "interbeing," of connection to others in terms of bodies, space, shared material existence becomes of little consequence. The highest premium is placed upon an autonomy born of isolation. For the rationalist, this autonomy is a form of freedom that brings one closer to realizing God in human form.

Descartes's dream of autonomy is at first glance fully realized in digital culture. Autonomy and choice are hallmarks of user interaction in digital culture. One can control if, when, and how one interacts with others online. The virtual self is quintessentially "private," able to hide its interiority from others. The cyborgian interaction of person and computer enables a clear demarcation between the interior experience of self and world. The entirety of communication and imaging of the other takes place largely within an interior mental arena, within consciousness shaped entirely by the user's own internal workings save for the flickering signifiers of digital text. The assurance of "privacy," the (alleged) agency and freedom of the user, are hallmarks of the Cartesian "interiority." However, simultaneous with this ideal of autonomy is the paradox that the majority of online usage reflects a desire for connection with the others.

Finally, Descartes's famous maxim "I think therefore I am" translates into "I flicker therefore I am." For Descartes, *cogito ergo sum* offers reassurance that thinking activity of proves one's existence. "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounced it, or that I mentally conceive it."<sup>12</sup> The activities of thinking prove to Descartes only his existence; the cogito does not guarantee epistemological certainty. Similarly, in digital culture "I flicker, therefore I am" guarantees no epistemological certainty, but only the indubitable presence of bits and bytes that signify a rational (whether human or technological) consciousness.

To summarize, the enlightenment man of reason has effectively morphed into the neo-Liberal autonomous individual, whose online, disembodied presence fulfills Descartes's dream. The hype is Cartesian in three ways: (1) the alleged insignificance of the body to online interactions (on the Internet, no one knows your dog); (2) the freedom, autonomy, and private interiority allowed by digital control; and (3) the equation of existence with the rational consciousness of pure mind interacting with other minds.

Before discussing what I call the twist of new digital Cartesianism, it is important to recognize compassionately the desire for transcendence. The desire to transcend mortality and the limits of the flesh is ancient. After all, it is our body which brings us suffering through its limits of pain or ability. One can imagine and think of many possibilities that the body and its associated material conditions cannot achieve. One might argue that all literature and art stems from the desire to

transcend the limits of the body and expects inevitable death: one hopes to leave a part of oneself behind, to achieve immortality through the sharing of communicated ideas.

Second, utopian hopes of transcendence are echoed (albeit for different reasons) by radical theorists of digital culture such as Allucquère Rosanne Stone, Donna Haraway, and many others. These progressive thinkers hold out the hope that identities in digital environments can be fluid and “queer,” not fixed in static forms, that online interactions are potentially freed of bias, prejudice, and stereotyped. Finally, the utopian hopes envision digital worlds in which we connect with differences across national and geographic boundaries.

However, as I will now argue, my concerns are that in fact in online environments (1) difference is reductively defined by neo-Liberal definitions of the self; (2) there is little evidence that users engage with differences of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation beyond their stereotyped conception; (3) in educational spaces, one finds limited potential for the deep engagement and dialogue required for transformation.

I call this “digital Cartesianism with a twist” because most often, users inquire about the others “age /sex /location” in order to interpret communication, and/or to confirm one’s projection of the others identity. The “real body” is frequently invoked in online communication to authenticate identity and establish meanings. Unlike the Cartesian ideal, in digital transactions the body functions as a transcendental signifier. In online environments, the metaphysics of presence depends upon real bodies, despite the hype that cyberspace allows us to interact exclusively negative and with pure minds. Thus I argue that not only is the body not transcended, but it is invoked in reductive and stereotyped form.

#### THE BODY ONLINE

[E]ven when the body is anchored elsewhere and unavailable as the source of symbolic cueing, central distinctions that reference the body as connected to self will still be evoked as the basis of meaningful communication.<sup>13</sup>

In an essay titled “Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions,” Byron Burkhalter demonstrates that in his studies of newsgroup users

[d]iscussion between groups, which progressive people might hope would alleviate racial stereotypes, instead is a site where previously held stereotypes are made into self-fulfilling prophecies....In online discussions, readers treat racial identities as entailing particular perspectives....discrepancy arises when a person identified as a member of a particular racial group by his or her physical characteristics offers a perspective that is inconsistent with the stereotype of that group.<sup>14</sup>

The key point here is that online, readers make an “essentialized” link between a user’s racial identity and the perspective and views which that person is then believed to hold.

During online arguments, authors’ perspectives are used to challenge their racial identity. For example, the following post responds to the author who was troubled by Blacks she had seen on a talkshow and finds a discrepancy between the author’s identity as Black and the perspective she offers:

[And] it is a shame that you even have to ask these questions because I would hope that you see more blacks on Ricki Lake, whether you are black or white. But being black, I am truly amazed at what you have asked. I will just guess that you are still a teen, (as opposed to a hick that has never seen a black person) and haven't been out in the world and exposed to much.<sup>15</sup>

The online user is confused by how a "black person" could express a particular view which did not conform to the stereotyped notion of what perspective a black person should hold. The user reconciles the dissonance by attributing the discrepancy to the other's adolescent age and ignorance.

Resolving these puzzles by modifying the author's identity allows readers to maintain the connection between racial identities and perspectives....perspective and race are made to conform online. Far from being a site where race, racism, ethnocentrism, or stereotyping are banished, these phenomena flourish in newsgroups.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the hypes and hopes that online interaction might open new spaces of communication, there is ample evidence that users invoke habitual assumptions and stereotypes about bodies in order to make sense of the other.<sup>17</sup> As Stone describes in *The War of Desire and Technology*,

for symbolic exchange originating at and relating to the surface of the body, narrowing the bandwidth has startling effects. A deep need is revealed to create extremely detailed images of the absent and invisible body....Frequently in narrow-bandwidth communication the interpretative faculties of one participant or another are powerfully, even obsessively, engaged.<sup>18</sup>

Stone argues further, following Jacques Lacan, that desire "theorized as a response to perceived lack, arises as a product of the tension between embodied reality and the emptiness of the token, in the forces that maintain the preexisting codes...for body....that are absent from the token."<sup>19</sup>

The body's role as "final arbiter" of authentic identity is evident across studies of online interaction. One of the most revealing crises of interaction in which the "body" plays a most obvious role is in users' experiences of "deception" with another user. One of the more famous is the incident of Joan, the "wheelchair therapist." Despite that he was "in fact" a man, the user Alex presented himself online (or, was misperceived once and then came to assume this continuing identity) as a disabled, wheelchair-bound female therapist. As an online persona, over the course of several months "Joan" developed numerous highly intimate relations with other women. When eventually "some of the online friends wanted to meet her in person," real-life Alex freaked out and decided that online Joan needed to die. Joan's fictitious husband then gets online and tells the friends that Joan is deathly ill in a hospital. When the online friends offer an outpouring of financial and emotional assistance, real-life Alex finally decides Joan needs to recover. However, when "real" cards and flowers are sent to the supposed Manhattan "hospital;" the fiction unraveled and Joan is revealed to be Alex. There are numerous accounts of this particular event. Joan's friends were furious with the deception. As Sherry Turkle summarizes, some of the anger is simply anger at being lured into intimacy by a man who poses as a woman to win their secret confidence. Some of the anger

centers on the fact that Joan had introduced some of her online women friends to lesbian netsex, and the women involved felt violated by Joan's virtual actions [when in fact he was a man]....In other accounts, Joan introduced online friends to Alex, a Manhattan psychiatrist, who had real-life affairs with several of them.<sup>20</sup>

The anger at being deceived turns on the “body” being the final arbiter of authentic identity and hence truth. As Jodi O’Brien argues, “Ultimately, one has either a vagina or a penis, and the presence of one or the other of these physical attributes marks an ‘authentic’ immutable presence in time and space. Or so we will continue to believe.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of “deceptions,” the “physical attribute” of one’s “real” biological identity functions to determine “the real person.” As Stone notes, “the societal imperative with which we have been raised is that there is one primary persona, or ‘true identity,’ and that in the off-line world—the ‘real’ world—this persona is firmly attached to a single physical body.”<sup>22</sup>

It can be argued that the instances I list represent only some kinds of online interactions, and that virtual relationships have the potential to transcend these limited and stereotyped conceptions of the self and its relationship to an essentialized body. To which I respond yes, and yes. But as O’Brien argues, for online relationships to represent and inhabit truly “queer” or “transgendered space,” the social meanings shared by those inhabitants on and off-line must be social meanings not constrained by the still omnipresent and dominant assumptions about such categories as gender and race. Unfortunately, there is not yet evidence that the majority of users inhabiting online spaces represent a demographics of democracy, much less a population who shared “queered” understandings of the relationship of sex to gender. And my question remains: how might these narrow bandwidth educational interactions disrupt fixed assumptions? One must examine the complexity of people’s social networks, and cannot examine solely “whether and how an individual transforms her ideas in an online educational environment.” Any person’s experience is occurring in myriad spaces and places and interactions. Nonetheless, I want to raise the alarm that it is not at all clear that the disembodied, anonymous space of online communication will assure that users in any way challenge fixed notions of gender and racial identities.

To summarize, instances in which users “deceive” others through their online self-representations illustrate precisely how the body functions as the final arbiter of truth, authenticity, and meaning. You can be whomever you want to be online, but quite often you’ll be asked to reveal your “true” identity—meaning, a shorthand reference to your gender or race. And once you have uttered “male or female, black or white” there is little fluidity or ambiguity about what this nomenclature means.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL CARTESIANISM FOR EDUCATION

What are the implications of digital Cartesianism for online education? If my argument is correct, that bodies are not in fact transcended by reason, what does this mean for progressive, radical, or feminist pedagogies? As a frame, consider Bordo’s critique of Descartes and her suggestion the goal of “dynamic objectivity.”

If the key terms in the Cartesian hierarchy of epistemological values are clarity and distinctness—qualities which mark each object off from the other and from the knower—the key term in this alternative scheme of values might be designated as *sympathy*.... [Sympathetic understanding] means granting personal or intuitive response a positive epistemological value, even (perhaps especially) when such response is contradictory or fragmented. “Sympathetic” thinking, Marcuse suggests, is the only mode which truly respects the object, that is, which allows the variety of its meanings to unfold without coercion or too focused interrogation.<sup>23</sup>

Bordo outlines Evelyn Fox Keller's notion of "dynamic objectivity," and argues that in contrast to the conception of dynamic objectivity, Descartes's program for the purification of the understanding...has as its ideal the rendering impossible of any such continuity between subject and object. The scientific mind must be cleansed of all its "sympathies" toward the objects it tries to understand. It must cultivate absolute detachment.<sup>24</sup>

Sandra Harding calls this a supreme characterization of modern science, and a "super masculinization of rational thought."<sup>25</sup> Feminists and others have directly extended this critique to digital identities. Anne Balsamo writes,

Upon analyzing the 'lived' experience of virtual reality, I discovered that this conceptual denial of the body is accomplished through the material repression of the physical body. The phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the willful repression of the material body....From a feminist perspective is clear that the repression of the material body belies a gender bias in the supposedly disembodied (gender free) world of virtual reality.<sup>26</sup>

Balsamo's argument confirms the longstanding feminist critique of Cartesian rationality: namely, the ideal of a reality "free from bodies" reflects the masculinist ideal which entails a "repression" of materiality and the body.

To conclude this essay, I will show how dynamic objectivity can be linked to some of the goals of socially progressive pedagogy. What counts as an educational experience that leads to growth and transformation? Specifically, to what extent is this experience connected to the material and social environment of proximity? In *Experience and Education*, Dewey cautions:

A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile.<sup>27</sup>

Dewey emphasizes the educator's responsibility to consider the concrete surroundings that shape educational experience. Educational growth and transformation cannot be divorced from the material environment.

[W]e live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum.<sup>28</sup>

Dewey's urging to consider the "distributed" experience of the self suggests a fundamental epistemological and ontological problem for online education. In contemporary terms, Alison Adam asks in *Artificial Knowing*,

how far is the body or embodiment necessary for having knowledg?...at least two aspects of situatedness are of interest—being physically situated in an environment (which relates to the embodiment problem) and being socially situated in a culture.<sup>29</sup>

Foreshadowing the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault as well as contemporary analyses of how space is defined not merely in terms of its absolute, physical stasis but rather how spaces dynamically construct social experience and vice versa, Dewey's critique of "traditional" education parallels contemporary concerns about online education:

Traditional education...could systematically dodge this responsibility. The school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard, was supposed to suffice. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources.<sup>30</sup>

At minimum, Dewey's critique suggests that online education aligns itself with traditional aims. Without doubt, online education can systematically dodge the need to "become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, and occupational, in order to utilize them as educational resources."

A second key concern has to do with the central importance of the body as both a kind of "text" shared within a physically proximate environment, and the value of the body as part of a transformative pedagogy. Feminist pedagogies most consistently have argued for the body's centrality in education. To engage with others via digital representations of language and images configures experience in an atomized way. The individualized body in front of a computer constructs self as isolated. The hype sells us "accessibility": women homebound with children now have access to education. Yet this reinscribes women's isolation in the home. Why not insist rather that women deserve adequate childcare so they can engage in face-to-face education? To isolate certain bodies geographically may deliver less on the promise of "connection" across borders, and rather reinscribe women's exclusion from the public sphere.

Finally, how can we measure dialogue in its transformative sense as engaged in computer mediated communication? Paulo Freire argues that dialogue

cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking-thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.<sup>31</sup>

To what extent is this kind of dialogue possible in the absence of face-to-face communication? To engage in a form of thinking which "perceives reality as process, as transformation" and which does not "separate itself from action... without fear of the risks involved" seems in part antithetical to the distanced form of interaction in digital environments. One of the primary arguments about digital participation is that users feel more free to participate because of the safety offered by relative anonymity. This could not be further than the kind of risk-taking Freire calls for, a risk-taking that is based in action and in the kind of transformation which occurs through a deep form of listening to the other.

In virtual interaction, there is a high likelihood of what I call "drive-by difference." For example, computer-mediated expressions of experience related to oppression are unlikely to engage the reader in the kind of "bearing witness" necessary to transformative dialogue. It is very difficult to demand attentive listening and deep grasp of another's experience within the context of fast-paced, multitasking, impermanent traces of digital interaction. Computer mediated communication encourages, at best, the superficiality of drive-by difference. Unfortunately, there is not yet evidence that the majority of users inhabiting online spaces

represent a demographics of democracy, much less a population who share “queered” understandings of the relationship of sex to gender. How are educators, in particular, to challenge cultural habits, values, and norms within the narrowed bandwidth on text-based interactions?

The brave new world of digital education promises greater access, increased democratic participation, and the transcendence of discrimination through pure minds. We must interrogate the actuality of these hypes: who has access; is participation online transformative, and is transcendence of difference a goal of progressive pedagogies? The hype tells us that the Man of Reason has morphed into the neo-liberal digital consumer who transcends all local differences and speaks the universal language “digital” (as in the World Com Generation D commercial series). However, the actualities reveal that online communication belies Descartes’s dream: in fact what we find is that users crave connection with others; stereotyped notions of the body are invoked; and the public/private divide is reinscribed by keeping mothers learning—and shopping—in the isolated sphere of their kitchens while men continue to use new technologies to be transported into high-rise corporate offices. Our challenge is to envision “web-enhanced” education, and a critical digital pedagogy, that refuses to be sold a world cleansed of the necessarily uncomfortable interactions that define the messy sphere of ethics and transformative education.

1. See Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London: Routledge, 1993), 187-216; Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Theresa Senft, “Introduction: Performing the Digital Body—A Ghost Story,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, ed. Theresa M. Senft and Stacy Horn (New York: Women and Performance Project Inc, 1996), 9-34.
2. See Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: SUNY, 1987); Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); and Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, *Creatures of Prometheus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).
3. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
4. Ingrid Banks, “Reliance on Technology Threatens the Essence of Teaching,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (16 October 1998).
5. Yet others argue, to the contrary, that degrading and harmful norms and stereotypes are reinscribed within the social spaces digital relations. Hegemony and the male gaze is increasingly documented in the assumed “we” articulated or imagined by the users in an online community. In “Type Normal Like the Rest of Us: Writing, Power, and Homophobia in the Networked Composition Classroom,” *Tilting Power*, ed. Linda Garber (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117-27, Allison Regan analyzes the pedagogical and ethical dilemmas she faces when, in an online chat in her composition course, a student expresses death threats towards homosexuals, and in the ensuing discussion the students use the pronoun “we” revealing the assumption that all participants were heterosexual. Regan analyzes how such homophobic expressions easily result in the silencing and “exclusion of lesbian and gay participants from networked conversation” (118). In “Writing in the Body: Gender (Re)Production in Online Interaction,” *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 76-106, Jodi O’Brien argues that for online relationships to represent and inhabit truly “queer” or “transgendered space,” the social meanings shared by those inhabitants on- and off-line must be social meanings not constrained by the still omnipresent and dominant assumptions about such categories as gender and race. See also Byron Burkhalter, “Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions,” Smith, *Communities in Cyberspace*, 60-75.
6. Banks, “Reliance on Technology Threatens the Essence of Teaching.”
7. Ibid.

8. Descartes quoted in Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, 95.
9. *Ibid.*, 26.
10. *Ibid.*, 94.
11. Anne Balsamo, "The Virtual Body in Cyberspace," *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 493.
12. Descartes, quoted in Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, 24.
13. O'Brien, "Writing in the Body," 85.
14. *Ibid.*, 72-73.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Burkhalter, "Reading Race Online," 73.
17. Complicating the claim that cyberspace assumes hegemonic norms may be the more accurate analysis that users look for mirror images of themselves. For example, in one account two groups of young children had been interacting online between Louisiana and New York for some months; when the Louisiana group receive a photograph of their penpals, they express shock and ask, "Where are the brothers?" They had assumed their penpals to be "black like them." Margaret Riel, "Cross-Classroom Collaboration: Communication and Education," *CSCL: Theory and Practice of an Emerging Paradigm*, ed. Timothy Koschmann (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996). In this case, the gaze brought to bear appears not necessarily to be the dominant cultural gaze but the gaze of the self seeking itself. In short, while there is a promise of "freedom" in the anonymity of text-based virtual communities, and a promise that we "transcend" assumed differences in our online interactions, in fact I believe users may tend to reproduce themselves in imagined others. To the extent that this is accurate, psychoanalytic analyses of the self-other relations constructed in online communities is promising. For example, see Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*. Unfortunately, there is not yet evidence that the majority of users inhabiting online spaces represent a demographics of democracy, much less a population who shared "queered" understandings of the relationship of sex to gender. How are educators, in particular, to challenge cultural habits, values, and norms within the narrowed bandwidth on text-based interactions?
18. Allucqu re Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 93.
19. *Ibid.*, 95.
20. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 229.
21. O'Brien, "Writing in the Body," 95-96.
22. Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology*, 73. In social theories of online identities and communities, there is debate about what constitutes the "real" persona and disagreement about what such ethics must be based upon. For example, when this crisis occurred in the CompuServe community, "the hackers...just smiled tiredly....All of them had understood from the beginning that the nets presaged radical changes in social conventions, some of which would go unnoticed. That is, until an event like the disabled woman who is revealed to be 'only' a persona—not a true name at all—along with the violated confidences that resulted from the different sense in which various actors understood the term person, all acted together to push these changes to the foreground" (80-81). At what point did the transgression of acceptable ethical norms occur? Where does one draw the line regarding which self counts as real in online interactions? However, these questions are beyond my scope. My focus is simply to recount how the body functions as an emergent "metaphysics of presence."
23. Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, 102-3.
24. *Ibid.*, 103-4.
25. Harding quoted in Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, 104.
26. Anne Balsamo, "The Virtual Body in Cyberspace," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, 493.
27. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938/1963), 40.
28. *Ibid.*, 39-40.
29. Alison Adam, *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine* (London: Routledge, 1998), 129.
30. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 40.
31. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 92.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of horizontal segments in shades of yellow and orange, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The New Digital Cartesianism: Bodies and Spaces in  
Online Education

SOURCE: Philos Educ Yearbook 2002

WN: 0200107270053

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2003 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.