

Religion on the Internet:  
Cyborg Anthropology and Religion 2.0

**RLST 2750**

*Spring 2009, AC 332*

*10:00-11:15 a.m., Tuesday and Thursday*

**Instructor: Annie Blakeney-Glazer**

Office Hours: 1:00-2:30, Tuesday at Cups in Fondren

10:00-Noon, Wednesday in CC 08

(and by appointment)

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*Course Description:*

The central claim of this course is that technology affects understandings of community and identity. As anthropologists, we will investigate online religious communities in order to learn how religious practices and beliefs function in virtual spaces. By the end of the semester, you will be able to analyze and explain online religious practices as well as analyze and explain your own role as an anthropologist of online religion. This course will be driven by your own research. Each of you will investigate a specific online religious community over the course of the semester, asking: how does religion function online? How do people interact without bodies? How can a scholar represent an online community to an outside audience?

*Course Objectives:*

- To explore the **relationship between media and belief**
- To hone **critical thinking skills** by questioning cultural processes
- To practice **self-reflexive anthropology** by exploring our roles and obligations as scholars

### *Assignments:*

The over-arching assignment for the course will require each of you to conduct anthropological research with an online religious community. After a short introduction to anthropological practices, you will begin fieldwork. Your research will contribute to a collaborative research paper co-written by the students and teacher. In order to do effective research for this over-arching project, you will be responsible for online responses to assigned readings, weekly fieldnotes on your chosen religious community, and a midterm and a final exam. Reflections on readings should be posted on CourseConnect. A detailed description of this assignment is included at the end of the syllabus. There are 10 opportunities to post responses. To receive full credit for this assignment, you must submit 7 responses. You will also be responsible for 7 sets of fieldnotes. There are 8 opportunities to submit fieldnotes. During the fieldwork units of the class, you will be responsible for facilitating one class session.

### *Assigned Readings:*

Students should purchase the following book:

- Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life* (2008)

Due to the late addition of this course, this book will not be available in the bookstore. Please purchase it through other means. All other assigned readings will be available on CourseConnect, <http://courses.millsaps.edu>.

### *Grading:*

Assignments will be given the following weight:

Class participation: 35% (including session facilitation and research paper collaboration)

CourseConnect postings: 15%

Fieldnotes: 30%

Collaborative Research Project: 20%

## **You are expected to adhere to the Millsaps honor code.**

- [http://www.millsaps.edu/academics/honor\\_code.shtml](http://www.millsaps.edu/academics/honor_code.shtml)

*If you have any needs or require accommodations related to a disability, please contact Patrick Cooper to register for disability services. You can reach him via e-mail at [coopeap@millsaps.edu](mailto:coopeap@millsaps.edu) or by calling extension 1228. Accommodations will not be granted until a meeting with Patrick has taken place each semester, and letters have been received by your instructor.*

## UNIT 1, INTRODUCTIONS

### ***Tuesday, January 13***

Introductions

### ***Thursday, January 15, Understanding the Internet***

**Readings:** Manuel Castells, "Virtual Communities or Network Society," in *The Internet Galaxy*, 116-136.

**Discussion Questions:** How does technology affect identity? What does Castells see as the impact of the Internet on human relationships?

### ***Tuesday, January 20, Looking at Religion Online***

**Readings:** Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan, "Introduction," Elena Larsen, "Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online," and Douglas Cowan, "Contested Space: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda" in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, 1-20, 255-268.

**Discussion Questions:** How does technology affect religion? What is surprising or thought provoking about the statistics provided by Larsen? How do religious groups and critics of religious groups function on the internet?

**Thursday, January 22, A Case Study of Online Religion**

**Readings:** Douglas Cowan, "Among the Stones of Cyberhenge: Modern Pagan Ritual on the World Wide Web," in *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, 119-152.

**Discussion Questions:** How does this case study relate to the trends we discussed on Tuesday? What is the "problem of interphysicality" and how does Cowan address it?

**\*Friday Forum: January 23, 12:30 p.m. in AC 215, Melissa Stern: "Loose Lips"**

We will discuss Stern's work with artist Brent Fogt in class on Thursday, February 5.

**Discussion Questions:** What are the story-telling strategies that Stern uses in her art? How is this similar or different from online story-telling? What is useful about Stern's work that we can use in our anthropological investigations?

**Tuesday, January 27, Technology and Religion**

**Readings:** Benedict Anderson, "Census, Map, Museum" and "Memory and Forgetting" in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 163-206

**Discussion Questions:** How did changing technologies affect the ways that humans imagined nations and communities? What cultural tools allowed for connections between people and subsequent political containment and domination? How can we relate these cultural tools and practices to the tools and practices of Internet interaction?

**Thursday, January 29, Questioning Fieldwork**

**Readings:** Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology" in *Anthropological Locations*, 1-46

**Discussion Questions:** What is anthropology and how do we do it? How do Gupta and Ferguson's insights help us understand how to do anthropology of religion online?

**Tuesday, February 3:**

- Identification of field sites.
- Establishment of ground rules.

**UNIT 2, THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUAL FIELDWORK**

**Thursday, February 5: Mapping and Storytelling**

*Class will be held in the Lewis Art Gallery with guest instructor Brent Fogt.*

**Readings:** Bin Jiang and Ferjan Ormeling, "Mapping Cyberspace: Visualizing, Analysing, and Exploring Virtual Worlds," in *The Cartographic Journal* 37(2), 117-122.

**Discussion Questions:** What does mapping reveal about online interactions? What methods do Jiang and Ormeling employ to map online networks? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each method? How does this relate to the storytelling strategies of Melissa Stern's "Loose Lips"?

**Tuesday, February 10 (Student Session)**

What does mapping reveal about your community? What storytelling strategies are used?

**Reflection Assignment 1: Observation.**

**Thursday, February 12, Language**

**Readings:** Mark Warschauer, "Language, Identity, and the Internet," in *Race in Cyberspace*, 151-170.

Selections from Jonathan Keats, *Control+Alt+Delete: A Dictionary of Cyberslang*. (I am giving you a large section of this text. I do not expect you to read all of it. Please look in particular at the "Introduction" and

the entries on “The Desktop Metaphor,” “Googlage,” “Memetics,” “X’s Law,” “Netiquette,” “Social Networking,” “Spam Lit,” and “Wiki U.”)

**Discussion Questions:** Warschauer points to two contradictory understandings of language usage on the Internet. What are his findings? What does his case study of Hawaiian language demonstrate about the multiple uses for the Internet as a cultural placeholder? Keat’s dictionary is evidence that Internet usage entail linguistic choices. How can we relate this to Warschauer’s ideas on language as a marker of cultural identity?

**Tuesday, February 17 (Student Session)**

How does language function in your online community? What language is used? What linguistic tools are present to establish a community?

**Reflection Assignment 2: Listening.**

**Thursday, February 19, Religious Practices**

**Readings:** Heidi Campbell, “The Internet as Spiritual Network: Spirituality and Religion Online,” in *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 53-74.

Brenda Brasher, “Cyber-Seekers: Stories of Virtual Pilgrimage,” in *Give Me That Online Religion*, 68-93.

**Discussion Questions:** How is religion “done” online? What does Campbell’s work on Christian online communities reveal about the emphases and primary practices of these communities? What do the different experiences that Brasher chronicles tell us about the variety of online religious experience?

**Tuesday, February 24 (Student Session)**

How is religion “done” in your community?

**Reflection Assignment 3: Participation.**

**UNIT 3, DISEMBODIED INTERACTION: REPRESENTATION AND MISREPRESENTATIONS**

**Thursday, February 26, Representations**

**Readings:** Scott McCloud, “The Vocabulary of Comics” in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 24-59.

Lisa Nakamura, “‘Ramadan Is Almost Here!’ The Visual Culture of AIM Buddies, Race, Gender, and Nation on the Internet,” in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, 37-69.

**Discussion Questions:** How are rendering and representation used to convey emotion and meaning?

**Tuesday, March 3 (Student Session)**

How are rendering and representation used in your community? What images are present? Are these user-created? What can this tell us about the community?

**Reflection Paper 4: Rendering and Representation.**

**Thursday, March 5, Avatars**

**Readings:** Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*

**Discussion Questions:** How does Meadows describe Second Life? What is an avatar and what consequences do avatar creation and interaction have?

**Tuesday, March 10 (Cyberguest)**

Cybervisit from RazorFish’s Web 2.0 Specialist

**Thursday, March 12, Gender Bending and Straightening**

**Readings:** Allucquere Rosanne Stone, “In Novel Conditions: The Cross-Dressing Psychiatrist” in *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, 65-81

Tara McPherson, “I’ll Take My Stand in Dixie-Net: White Guys, the South, and Cyberspace,” in *Race in Cyberspace*, 117-131

**Discussion Questions:** What are the primary differences between the communities described by Stone and McPherson? How do perceptions about bodies affect interactions? How does one convey gender or race in a space without bodies? How does McPherson challenge Stone's ideas about freedom in cyberspace?

*Spring Break!*

*Tuesday, March 24 (Student Session)*

How are race and gender addressed in your community?

**Reflection Assignment 5: Disembodied Interaction.**

*Thursday, March 26, Race*

**Readings:** Lisa Nakamura, "Measuring Race on the Internet: Users, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the United States" in *Digitizing Race*, 171-201

**Discussion Questions:** How is race measured in virtual spaces? What does Nakamura's case study of Asian-Americans reveal about racialized understandings online?

*Tuesday, March 31 (Student Session)*

What racial understandings are at work in your community?

**Reflection Assignment 6: Race.**

#### UNIT 4, CAPITALISM AND POST-HUMANISM

*Thursday, April 2, Wikinomics and Virtual Commodities*

**Readings:** Selections from Julian Dibble, *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*

Selections from Don Tapscott, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*

**Discussion Questions:** How does economics affect online interaction?

*Tuesday, April 7 (Student Session)*

How does money function in your community? What economic variables are present and how do they function?

**Reflection Assignment 7: Economics.**

*Thursday, April 9*

**Readings:** Selections from Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*

**Discussion Questions:** What is the culture of online communities?

*Tuesday, April 14 (Student Session)*

How can we effectively study online communities? Ethically, what is our responsibility as anthropologists of online religion?

**Reflection Assignment 8: Anthropological Ethics.**

*Thursday, April 16*

Collaboration on Research Paper

*Tuesday, April 21*

Collaboration on Research Paper

*Thursday, April 23*

Conclusions