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Virtual Blackness: Race and Gender in our Second Lives

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ABSTRACT

In writing about African American/African Diasporic presence in Second Life (SL), I want to highlight the contributions that black people make as creative forces in SL, as builders and designers, as event hosts and as entrepreneurs. In these roles, black residents help to make this virtual world an appealing environment for residents of African descent who want to socialize and collaborate with others of similar backgrounds, and it also helps to make SL a culturally diverse and truly international place. I want to examine how black culture is being represented and experienced in SL.

KEYWORDS

race, gender, Second Life, African American, African Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Beginning as a dancer, and transitioning to DJing, managing her own club and now buying and selling land within Second Life (SL), with her real-life (RL) husband's blessing and support (his avatar is named Caesar Wright), resident Lashey Lovell has developed an extensive network of contacts and invested a great deal of money and time to establish an active presence in SL. Their next project is a video production company with the goal of representing SL and its residents and activities in the larger internet and to SLTV with YouTube videos, and considering how many black people she is acquainted with who also have entrepreneurial desires they want to fulfill in this virtual world, her success with the latest venture can only help increase African American presence here. The development of Lovell's various entrepreneurial roles represents a fairly typical path for those who come to SL with the idea of making money, and while my interests as a professor of African American Studies have little to do with money, Lashey's story, and the experiences of other black women in virtual worlds raise some very interesting issues about representing race, and constructing culture and identity.

INITIAL QUESTIONS

What activities are black women engaged in within SL, and what is the significance of their choices to present themselves as black and female in an environment where radically or frequently changing appearance or switching genders is not simply possible, but also encouraged? What have their personal and professional experiences been like; how have they been impacted by their insistence on representing different aspects of black culture? How have their entrepreneurial achievements also been impacted by racism or by (inaccurate) perceptions of racial difference? What would they like to see Linden Labs, the developers of Second Life, do with respect to the problem of racist language and abuse in world, and in the absence of any effective policy being established, how do they handle (have they handled) such incidents and encounters? What are their future goals in SL, for their businesses as well as for personal or cultural activities? And what impact might these future plans have for the future of both virtual worlds and the wider culture in which they exist? To begin to explore these questions, I have conducted interviews with a few SL residents who in RL are black women, and I plan to continue this work to be able to write a larger story about the impact of virtual worlds on constructions of self as I share my reflections on that collective experience. I have also been thinking a great deal about the impact my participation in SL has had on my own sense of identity.

What functions does SL serve for me as a black female academic? Although I entered SL in the summer of 2007 in preparation for using the virtual world in the classroom during the fall 2007 semester for a first-year honors course with identity as its theme, I have found that the majority of the time I have spent in-world has been devoted to exploring my own construction of identity in some very playful, but still quite intellectually challenging ways. With this paper, I am trying to bridge the gaps between the highly entertaining forms of self-expression I have enjoyed in world, and the interests it holds for my professional life. In addition to trying to manage these competing demands on my time in a satisfying way, I am also increasingly committed to using SL to enhance learning for and interactions with students.

COMING TO SECOND LIFE

In-world, I use the avatar (AV) I created in June of 2007, CleoPatra Guyot, as an identity that I use both for entertainment and education. Cleo is a member of a number of fashion groups and musicians' fan clubs, but she also belongs to the group of builders from my institution, as well as the alumni group from my graduate institution. She has in her inventory a wardrobe that is appropriate for attending virtual conferences and meetings with other scholars in world; but she also has accumulated an extensive collection of high-fashion items conducive to attending the formal dances, art gallery openings and live concerts that are also quite popular here. She has non-professional friends on her list that she talks to just about every day, as well as an ever-expanding group of fellow educators sharing their own ideas about and experiences on virtual islands such as EdTech Island, NOAA Virtual Islands in SciLands, or MIT, as well as the Second Life in Education (SLED) list.

As a new resident of SL, you quickly learn that your inventory of clothing, hair, skin, furniture and other objects goes a long way in defining who you are and enhancing your identity. Probably the most important items that your inventory contains are your clothing and body parts that define your appearance, as well as the gestures and animations that facilitate your movements. For example, hair that is worn as a style, including facial hair, is something that must be purchased or created by a resident separately as an aspect of avatar appearance, along with body shape, height and proportions; designer "skins" are also available for purchase, and they add a significant element of avatar appearance, not only by representing a choice of skin tone, but also because of the way that they are shaded to create the illusion of dimensions. Skins present the form of musculature, and they can also be designed with tattoos or 2-D piercings, as well as "makeup," which defines the facial features of female avatars to appear as if they have applied blush or lipstick or eyeshadow, but also applies as a term to allow male avatars to choose the shape and thickness of their eyebrows, and to define other facial features, including the shape and density of the very fashionable shadow created by the unshaved beard. Skins are why all the guys in SL have great abs and can change or add tattoos as often as they might want; shapes give the women in SL as much (or as little) chest or hips as they would like. Eye color can be changed at will into a range of colors not found in nature, but often favored by elves, fairies and vampires. Gestures and animations allow your avatar to move and to pose the body and the face; you can smile or laugh or frown, appear puzzled or disgusted, stick out your tongue or scream in fright, and you can choose how to walk, to run, to dance, or to sit, among other actions and motions. I should also make you aware that the newbie AV in SL comes into the world like Ken and Barbie, unable to engage in sexually explicit activity until some concerned and well-meaning older and experienced resident guides them to the stores where genitals can be tested and purchased.

Since one can change appearance freely, limited only by the imagination of the designer or builder and the amount of Linden dollars in one's pocket, it is not surprising that some residents choose to be an elf one day, and a cartoon character the next; SL contains a number of subcultures built around non-human or anthropomorphic creatures. In addition to the above-mentioned elves and vampires there are furies and tinies, all of whom form their own social communities. Also, SL residents often swap their RL genders for the opposite in SL, and though the statistical evidence for this digital transsexuality is not definitive, it does seem to be a significant aspect of the immersive universe. Likewise, racial passing is a possibility that some in SL explore. Historically in the US, some women and men of African descent with phenotypes that could be interpreted as being white used those physical features to function in racially segregated social spaces as having the privilege of white identity. While some did this on a temporary basis, perhaps to gain access to public performance spaces such as concert halls or movie theaters for individual events, others made the switch permanently to gain access to jobs and housing that other black people were denied. One question that occurred to me as I began to explore SL was whether or not some black RL residents might take advantage of the relative ease in changing appearance to engage in a version of racial passing by creating an appearance for their AVs that would be interpreted as white, and therefore, as part of the mainstream, "normal," identity that they would not otherwise be able to experience.

When I first created CleoPatra, the idea of not being female or not being black never occurred; some of this of course is due to the expectation of using her to represent myself with students with whom I would also be developing relationships in the real world, so I wanted there to be coherence between the person they would be meeting in SL and the teacher who they would be working with in RL. As I have become increasingly involved in building different and sometimes overlapping social networks in world, the question of creating a new identity, as a male, or as a female of a different ethnicity (or even nationality) has had very little appeal. When considering why this is so, I find that I have truly developed an empathy with Cleo, and an attraction to this alternative version of myself, one that is much more outgoing than I am in RL (and much better dressed). Yet it must be the teacher in me that persists in taking the time to type words in full when chatting with others; I find myself reluctant to use many of the texting-influenced abbreviations that are typical of communication in SL, preferring to say what I need to say clearly (it does help to be able to actually type with all ten fingers, rather than being someone who pecks at the keyboard), so this is certainly one of the ways in which Cleo reflects my real-world persona. I use the literacy skills I have already developed in my years of education to stand out from the mainstream of those who don't care very much about spelling and grammar, or who don't have a very well-developed vocabulary. Having a pretty healthy and somewhat wry sense of humor has also been a quite effective aspect of Cleo's identity in a virtual reality in terms of building relationships with others, and as the weeks began to pass, and I became both more comfortable manipulating my AV and more interested in knowing more virtual reality and exploring its possibilities for enhancing my experiences, I also started to wonder whether being identified clearly as an African American woman here could even become an asset for me in my social networks.

Initially, Cleo did not meet many other black AVs, male or female, and it was also somewhat of a challenge to find skin and hair that would give her the appearance I wanted so that she would not look like a white girl with a really deep tan. I hoped to solve the first problem by joining some of the organized groups in SL that identified themselves as cultivating and supporting black residents; I solved the second by searching the Second Life website for residents and scanning its many recommendations of fashion designers, including skin designers, to discover some of its in-world fashion publications (such as *Second Style* and *Prim Perfect*) and also some of its popular fashion blogs out-of-world. Once I put together an appearance that I liked, and just started logging on regularly to search for interesting events related to arts and culture, or places with music I liked and people having conversations that held my attention, I found that I stood out in the crowd somewhat for not being blond and buxom. Although I have read a number of blogs describing female AVs constantly being unsubtly approached by male AVs for virtual sex, I have to admit that I have been rather fortunate to not have this be my defining experience. I must also admit that, until I began doing some interviews with other black women in about their experiences as research for this paper, I did not have many female AVs on my friends' list at all, let alone other black female AVs. I suppose I had quickly decided to test the efficacy of SL as a social space for me as a single female in RL by approaching male AVs selectively for conversation, and in doing so, fairly quickly seemed to build a friends' list with mostly males on it, and mostly white males. It seemed to me that if such a large number of social spaces were built as clubs for dancing, that I might as well approach whoever was there to dance that was not already paired off with someone, but that who ever I approached had to have something about them that was of interest to me in RL that I could talk about. This was where the resident profiles in the people search feature in SL became useful. Just as I added a comment in my profile about my New Orleans hometown still needing help in the aftermath of Katrina, I looked in other people's profiles to see what groups they belonged to, or if they had written something interesting about their SL identity. An acquaintance who is among the friends I regularly talk to is an engineer in RL; originally, I approached him because I saw his AVs last name was Pontchartrain (as in the Lake I grew up in walking distance from), and wanted to know if he was connected to New Orleans in any way. It turned out that he wasn't, but that one question led to a conversation, and that in turn has led to countless others.

Once I discovered how easy it was to approach others in SL, I was encouraged to be much more outgoing than I typically am in RL; there was a sense of safety in SL provided by its anonymity that also helped me not take the potential for rejection seriously, instead adding an element of *fun* and playfulness that encouraged flirtation, but also required me to set some ground rules for my conduct. The main rule I set for myself was to respect already established SL couples or marriages. Again, my experience in this may be atypical, but one evening, I instant messaged (IM) a male AV I saw at a dance club just because I thought he was cute; having pulled up his profile, I read that he credited his wife for making his SL and his RL so meaningful and enjoyable, so my IM became something like, "Tell your wife she's a lucky girl to have a sweet and cute husband like you!" It actually felt good to be able to acknowledge and genuinely compliment a RL couple enjoying SL together, and to offer some encouragement to the committed husband, and then continue with my evening, enjoying the music and dancing. Given what I had begun seeing as the dominant media representation of SL as a place where obsessed residents were destroying their RL relationships by neglecting their spouses or significant others, it seemed even more important to show respect and admiration for partnerships, rather than actively seeking to disrupt them. And although I had also read blog entries concerning problems with abusive language or behavior by some residents targeting other residents, it

was clear to me that being an easy-going and friendly resident was much more rewarding than being what some of the abusers and hackers are typically referred to, as a griever.

As this brief overview of my initiation into and early experiences with SL shows, although I introduced this discussion in terms of a process of creating an identity by referring to my avatar in the third person, throughout most of this summary, I moved back and forth between talking about Cleo's appearance and activities, and talking about myself in first person, to the point where I am more easily talking about "me" and "I", rather than Cleo as "she". Cleo is nearly two years old in SL, and over the course of these many months, the ways that my identity in SL and my RL identity converge has become something I have spent a great deal of time thinking about. In a recent blog post, Steven Warburton identifies a step in the process of avatar creation and identity as the threshold of care, the "fuzzy" point at which we

begin to feel an emotional pull towards our virtual self and yes, we start to **care** about our avatar. Our creation has become an entity, even a personality, in its own right. How does this happen and how is this possible? The clearest way of understanding this process is one that touches mainly, though not exclusively, on the concepts of social and cultural capital: the building of friendships and connections; becoming part of a community; purchasing artifacts that increase our avatar's aesthetic appeal; a variety of other cultural exchanges and physical engagements that can be as simple as building ones own in-world residence and holding a house warming party.

However fuzzy this turning point may be, anecdotal experience in SL suggests strongly that for those who invest the time necessary to learn to manipulate an avatar and various accessories and other objects in SL also make an investment in the identity (or identities) created as a result of that learning process. Metrics of the SL population indicate that female AVs spend more time in-world than male ones, and the social roles that are accepted in our society as feminine behaviors or female activities—making social connections, dressing to be aesthetically pleasing—are exactly the activities that count most in the play that is SL. And the possibilities that come with anonymity, such as the ease of gender switching, allows the RL male to express tender feelings and make emotional connections that are not as easy to make according to the expected social roles for men in RL.

As a virtual world, SL offers new forms of cultural experience, requiring new ways of looking at identity and dealing with subjectivity—what we feel and think and perceive, what we value and enjoy, what we fear and desire. It is a place where one can meet people from any country in the world, in real time, and with few of the socially constructed barriers associated with RL. Although language differences exist that can potentially be a barrier, and differences in time zones can make it a challenge to meet some people regularly, and the hardware required to access and use SL can be expensive for some, I would say that I still find the openness and friendliness of all the geeks and nerds, merchants and clothing designers and musicians, one of its defining virtues, as well as an aspect of virtual reality that one might want to emulate in RL. So far, my experience in SL tells me that being understood and appreciated in all our human aspects is possible. It is akin to a spiritual journey, as through my avatar, I have been able to explore aspects of identity that I have not previously or fully explored in RL, to meet people I would not ever have had contact otherwise in RL, and reflect on the meaning of both the self-exploration and the relationships I have developed. In this way, it is almost as if through CleoPatra, Angela has been reborn.

Self-knowledge that comes through having new experiences, enlightenment that comes from understanding your relationship to others, are greatly enhanced in virtual worlds because the trust that can be established in relationships with others relies on a level of intimacy that is established by sharing our private thoughts and fantasies. Interaction in a virtual environment allows a level of self-disclosure similar to that of previous versions of text-based chat rooms in that its users do feel more at ease sharing thoughts and emotions that they would not otherwise share with people who are considered acquaintances in RL, and this ease of sharing also seems to rely heavily on the ability to talk with SL friends much more frequently than with RL friends, even ones that ordinarily might be considered close friends, not just because of the level of intimacy, but also because of the regularity of those conversations in SL. It is much easier to talk to SL friends daily, even many times a day, just by logging on, when in RL, we must juggle schedules and responsibilities to carve out time for a regular dinner time with family members, or time to visit with friends on a consistent basis.

In a recent article, "Being There Together and the Future of Connected Presence," Ralph Schroeder describes the connectedness of shared virtual environments as an awareness or engagement that is significantly different from that of other new media forms in several ways, and yet argues that this is a psychological experience that resonates with other, more conventional, or more tested forms of social communication (mobile phones, teleconferencing, instant messaging, the land-line telephone). The terms that he applies to shared virtual environments (SVEs) like SL, There or Entropia generally

describe some of the major aspects of SL that make it attractive to users: the fact that it is an immersive environment, and that in this environment, avatars embody the individual user, or some form of the individual user's identity or personality that they particularly want to emphasize in enacting certain roles within specific scenes, or through interactions with others in that environment.²

Naming and appearance are two of the most important elements of your presentation of self in SL, and these are augmented and enriched by your group affiliations and profile, which anyone who meets you in-world or sees your name can pull up using the search tool. I put some thought into creating my name, wanting to choose a first name that would sound somewhat dignified, feminine and sexy without being trashy; I thought that the classical associations attached to the history of Cleopatra as a monarch would work well, and that being able to reclaim an interpretation of that history as being African and diasporic would immediately represent a necessary historical revision to those with the proper awareness, or create a learning opportunity for those needing a new awareness. I decided I wanted a French-sounding last name in recognition of my family heritage in south Louisiana and New Orleans; when I learned that "Cleopatra DeCuir" was taken, I settled on Guyot from the list of names available. I see this as an appropriate extension of some of my RL intellectual pursuits, and I complement this naming with group affiliations that include the National Black Arts Festival in SL, and fan groups for a number of jazz and blues-influenced) artists (one of whom makes a point to include zydeco in his sets, and who dresses his AV in denim shirt and jeans, cowboy boots and hat, like many of the dancers in Lafayette and Lake Charles do, so when I see him and hear him, I feel at home). In making choices about what to name your avatar, how to dress your avatar, and what you do while in SL, users/players/residents make choices about what personality to project, and though some choices are radically different from those made in RL, often imagined as an escape from RL into something different or forbidden or simply to satisfy a curiosity, RL elements also shine through. I felt it was important personally to identify as black and female to communicate something about my RL persona, and to make pride in New Orleans' cultural distinctiveness my calling card.

MEETING OTHER RESIDENTS

Long-time resident Eboni Khan is quoted by Wagner James Au in his New World Notes blog entry, "The Freeform Identity Bebop of Eboni Khan," as observing that, in her SL experience, "Race is pretty much a non-issue here. Although when I first started playing, there were very few African-Americans in the game. Now there are plenty. Or plenty pretending." While disapproving of some AVs created, presumably by RL whites, to represent a highly stereotyped version of black male identity—excessive and often incorrect use of black vernacular as a representation of being from the street and being hard, dressing with excessive bling and SL versions of designer kicks, jeans and hoodies, and prim dreadlocks—she goes on to suggest that her AVs identity as a black woman is an expression of having become comfortable in her own skin in RL, accepting her darkness, her features, and her body type. Khan sees her AV as an extension of RL in the sense of allowing her to pursue cultural interests (listening to jazz, hosting SL events such as fashion shows) and to also be very uniquely herself, as she describes it, " a conservative Black female Republican Buddhist," who is proud to be who she is, and doesn't find that even the more controversial or unexpected aspects of her chosen RL identity are a barrier to building meaningful and supportive relationships in SL. Instead, difference (racial and/or cultural) becomes an asset, and along with her fierce intelligence, her professional accomplishments, and her love of sci-fi, contribute in a positive way to making her AV someone that others like Au seek out for friendship.

And being in a virtual world certainly is no barrier to developing friendships that can be profoundly life changing, as another blog entry from Au relates:

Late last November, a woman was sitting in her home office, waiting for her broken computer to be repaired, when the disease that had been wracking her heart took its final toll, and killed her. She was 33.

Days later, a ceremony and vigil was held in-world for her, the mourners in black, their heads bowed, gathered in a ring around a shrine that bore her real life photograph. It depicts a young African-American woman with vivacious eyes and a giant grin, and even if most of the residents who came to mourn didn't know her in that incarnation, they still knew her well enough. On November 24th, a capacity crowd was there to remember the woman that most of them had only known as a slender, sexy brunette, the wittily-named ingenue known as Meltsinyourmouth Steed.⁴

Because of her illness and the physical limitations that it imposed, SL allowed Melts to interact with people without having to be identified as someone with a serious impairment, and instead, to be outgoing, and even a bit of an exhibitionist, despite the fact that she could no longer work or socialize in RL, but was confined to her home. Those who knew Melts and who Au

interviewed testified to the closeness of their relationships, the knowledge that for them, being able to talk to her was probably even more important than what their friendships did to help Melts through her ordeal.

Just as people have become accustomed to using various Internet support groups to find reassurance of their basic human need for understanding and self-expression, particularly among those coping with conditions that historically were considered stigmatized illnesses, such as AIDS or multiple sclerosis, so they have extended those functions to SL, with the important addition of the avatar as a physical representative that can be designed by the user to represent an ideal of physical attractiveness, and allow those who experience their RL bodies as unattractive to experience the self-esteem that comes from being attractive and having mobility. The authors point out that because of the anxiety and uncertainty they are feeling, patients are highly motivated by social needs to seek out others with the same illness, but prefer to do this on-line when the illness is an embarrassing, disfiguring, or otherwise stigmatized one, because of the anonymity afforded by Internet groups.⁵ People with various physical disabilities feel so strongly about the social networks they have developed, and the connections they have been able to make with others, that they use SL even as they must adjust and adapt according to their own narrowing abilities. Furthermore, they continue to use SL even when it does not have many of the accessibility features that would accommodate them.⁶ Such is the power of SL to bring people together with common physical difference in any form, whether that represented by the actual physical challenges of disabilities, or by the socially constructed difference of race, that these differences need not be a barrier to having real, meaningful and life-changing relationships in SL.

Instead of viewing racial difference as an element of identity with negative connotations or as a barrier to full participation in SL, others of the black women I talked with whose AVs were created as extensions of their RL identities also report that they found new self-confidence and autonomy in the virtual world even as they emphasized their identity as African American women. Nor did their racial identity inhibit their ability to develop social and professional contacts; further, the variety of ways in which these women express themselves and develop their interests have added to the general culture of the virtual world.

Nia Greene has been in SL since 2006, and has clearly experienced success in business and personal relationships. Nia seems to have been particularly able to make and exploit international partnerships, and though her clothing store was not very busy while I was there to interview her, it seems that might be due to the fact that her customer base is primarily European, as well as the fact that the new island she and her partner purchased had just opened. The visual look of the shopping areas that have been completed is very detailed and appealing, with wide open spaces for easy movement in streets from one store to another; the condos under construction also reveal an eye for detail and a desire to stand out from other locations in terms of communicating a feeling of openness and of opulence. Although I will have to try on the outfits I bought to be sure that that same eye for detail informs her clothes, which in her ads seem rather simplistic and run-of-the-mill urban casualwear knock-offs, heavy on designer logos, and not much else, but affordable as far as SL goes (around L\$200, some slightly higher). The image that these popular fashions project seems to go along with the LCD of most fashion consumers in SL; they want cheap clothing, and plenty of it, and don't care about many details other than the logos, the tight-body fit on the female AV, and much exposure of skin. These designs are successful in the sense that they sell well and meet a demand for fun and youthful style influences, but as a fashion consumer who prefers more distinctive clothing, I would like to see other black designers enter the field with more detailed and well-constructed designs. Nia does have plans to introduce a new line of clothing soon which I hope will meet this demand.

Shortly after coming to SL, Nia began learning to design clothes, and has transferred those skills to building and designing the locations on Diamond City, which will also include a club, and a headquarters for the radio station that will provide the music stream to her location and others. Her ambition to expand black business presence in SL is ambitious and smart; she has already mentored others looking to start stores of their own, and revealed to me that her RL work as an attorney not only gives her an advantage in setting out her own agenda, but also in advising others coming to SL. She is very outgoing, and was very forthcoming in answering my questions, so I really did appreciate the opportunity to meet her, considering how busy she is. She wore one of her new spring outfits based on the Burberry plaid, a short and top set that exposed a lot of skin and complimented her light creamy skin tone. Her shape also emphasized hips and butt to represent clearly a black woman body type. She talked about also the unexpected difficulties involved in having to establish trusting relationships with potential business partners; I did not get the impression that an awareness of racism was a new thing for her, but that like many of us, we hope that the image of SL as a promising and different place might also mean that progressive-minded people would be there, and function there without prejudice.

But as the possibility of making money often does, people are only willing to extend good will to others until the potential to exploit them financially becomes possible. Wisely, Nia decided to stop renting from a landowner when she and her designing

partner had accumulated more than enough money to be able to buy their own property, which is what they have done. I hope to be able to return to the store to better judge the traffic, and to also evaluate the club and the condos once they are completed.

The look of her store itself was very pleasing, elegant and ornate in a sophisticated way without being overdone, in black and gold, with touches of pink to add a sense of femininity. The music being streamed at the store was definitely rap-oriented for any younger black people or for Europeans overseas for whom the urban image is like catnip, while the music streamed at her home location was much more along the lines of an urban contemporary channel, with a mix of smooth jazz, and new and old R&B. She was also quite disdainful of any black people who would come to SL in another racial or ethnic identity, while being very understanding of the initial misgivings involved in learning how to manipulate SL and in establishing and maintaining relationships. Her home was also very well decorated with tasteful accessories suggesting a sophisticated black urban aesthetic, and the music stream also suggested a confident and mature professional woman completely comfortable with herself, and thoroughly enjoying her SL. She definitely has a healthy and playful sense of humor, and is so serious about the work that she does in SL that she doesn't want to take the time out to plan and purchase the necessities for the SL wedding that her boyfriend wants to have.⁷

Tempest Hennesy is a professional model in SL with a commitment to advancing the representation of black women and other women of color in the profession by training others at EFA and sharing with them the benefit of her connections and experiences. According to Tempest, this primarily entails helping future models be confident in their abilities, and confident that all ranges of blackness can and should be represented and accepted in the industry, especially when it is so important overall as a business opportunity, and is the focus of so much time and attention among residents. As she observes, "Every single event where they can see a poised, black, successful model is yet another opportunity to represent us as a people and as professionals." This strong nationalist awareness is complimented by some of Tempest's other social networks, particularly one centered in her membership in Zulu Nation, and complimentary activities sponsored by that group and held at Hoodstock Cafe. Owned by ZuluKing Dagger, and decorated with prominently placed images of important black historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Josephine Baker, and Josh Gibson, and also pop culture figures such as Michael Jackson, Freddie Prinze, Tupac Shakur, the cafe regularly programs poetry slams and other events to attract politically-minded black residents, while also raising RL funds for charities with direct impact on black communities, such as Water for Life and the MLK Foundation.⁸

While Tempest has seen other black women create AVs for themselves that do not maintain a consistently ethnic appearance, what seems to disturb her more is the tendency among designers seeking models who only want to use black models who fit an extreme, often stereotypical, appearance that relies on extremely dark skin and wearing an Afro, but does not acknowledge the reality that black women live, by reflecting a broader range of skin tones. Further, Tempest accurately problematizes the limited acceptance of some "African" features, particularly an exaggerated emphasis on booty and big lips, by white female AVs to enhance a sexualized image, attached to blond hair and covered by tanned skin; clearly, this issue is an extension of RL dynamics around sex and beauty in contemporary culture, where some aspects of black culture are appropriated and taken out of their original context by whites in order to make themselves more interesting. She regularly helps other residents to patronize designers who make quality skins for people of African descent, and keeps up-to-date with their offerings while also providing frank and effective advice about what products to develop to meet those needs.

I was again somewhat surprised when I met Scarletta Ember in person; from reading her profile and seeing her picture in that profile, I wasn't sure if she was actually a white woman in RL passing as black, or a black woman in RL favoring a white appearance. But in our conversation, she described her AV with its straight hair style and light-tan skin and green eyes as matching her RL appearance, and also identified her current goal as establishing a SL ministry as an extension of her RL involvement with her church home. She offered some very thoughtful reflections on hoping to create a viable social center for black residents in SL to feel that they had a place to go and a chance to build relationships that would help them in RL. She also believes that the presence of an appealing and relatable church community in SL would also help overcome some misgivings among blacks about using the internet as a place of personal disclosure or spiritual expression. Currently, she is learning to build, and has been spending a greater proportion of her time having fun and spending time with her BF, having temporarily put aside her business as a wedding consultant because of the amount of time it was taking her away from this relationship and from RL responsibilities. As a result, it was clear that her more relaxed approach to SL was allowing her to enjoy it more, but also gives her more time to her new goal, one in which her building skills will be valuable. While she hopes to return to the wedding business, she also seemed to have greater hopes for bringing more black relatives and friends from RL to the virtual world in order to facilitate close relationships over a long distance.⁹

Yet participating as a black female in SL is not without tensions or issues related to others' perceptions and expectations, especially when informed and distorted by stereotypes. Though Gaea Nightfire was a relative newcomer to SL when I first met her, she was rather comfortably situated in a well-decorated home (although it was not clear to me whether she bought the land, or rents it, or perhaps shares it with someone who takes care of the expenses), which is much more advanced than where I was at the same point in my in-world history. She is still in the process of establishing group identities, and in fact had joined a support group that day without being able to (or simply declining to) explain the purpose of the group.¹⁰

Hers was the first story I heard that clearly made a connection between having a black female avatar and having unpleasant encounters with male avatars immediately expecting sex, and her story of finding a male avatar intruder in another friend's home resonates with my own; it also leads me to question, as many other residents have, the degree to which Linden Labs leaves residents to fend for themselves when difficulties happen or irregularities occur, whether financial or sexual in nature. It seems that given the LL policies, the only thing residents can do is defend themselves by equipping their residential and business spaces with security systems, and learn some quick retorts to text to those who insist on approaching others with rude, crude, tasteless and boring propositions. Given that interaction and conversation are such a big part of what makes SL what it is, it seems that there could be more direct means for handling reports of abusive behavior, especially when such a significant number of avatars seem to be created for the sole purpose of selfishly seeking out sexual encounters that would be considered abusive in RL. I also find it interesting that with the relatively short time she has been in SL, she so far has also come to the conclusion that the few other black avatars she has met are not friendly or easy to become friends with. Yet she also consciously identified herself as "a black hippie," and so without knowing anything about her RL identity and background, I surmise that she is more comfortable socializing with whites. Still, that does not interfere with her willingness and ability to identify as black in SL; in appearance, her skin is of a light sandy brown shade, and her shape emphasizes wide hips and full thighs that reveal a definite comfort with a body image acceptable in black culture. In addition, her apartment was decorated with geometric African patterned baskets and fabrics, and she, like my other interview subjects, is a member of BMW.

One reason I ask the question about experiences with racism is that just as the perceived anonymity of SL allows black female residents the choice to obscure those (potentially) stigmatized identities in, so does the anonymity of SL allow others to identify with white supremacists without risk to their RL reputations. Although Gaea, Scarletta, Tempest and Nia had experienced discrimination in business relationships or in personal interactions, and dealt with those situations on their own terms in ways that did not cause them to give up on their goals, other kinds of conflicts, both subtle and extreme, have been documented on other blogs." In incidents of extreme racist language or threats, it seems feasible that the victims of such incidents might be so upset by them that they would choose not to return to SL; recognizing this, and perhaps having experienced or observed this, many other users see SL as a community that is different from some of the other MMOGs in that there is a shared idea that griefing is not appropriate or acceptable, and that as a virtual world, SL should actively represent and reflect higher ideals of tolerance and equality. "Part of the reason why extremism is given a chance to flourish," Nilsson argues, "is because culture clashes have been festering in the absence of a way for individuals to form transcendent communities— meaning, beyond the scope of the socio-economic, geopolitical and cultural lattice into which each person is born. Virtual worlds provide that opportunity. If I live in New York, Baghdad, Beijing, etc. but also consider myself a resident of a virtual community that contains people from all around the world, then I not only have to adapt to the reality of my existence in the physical world, but to the formation of new civic customs that are not reliant on physical limitations or lingering habits." ¹²

Even greater tensions seem to exist around differing expectations between men and women in SL about virtual sex. On the one hand, there seems to be a significant part of the population that comes to SL not knowing what to expect from it, or even with no expectation of becoming involved in a romantic relationship, but find themselves involved in an intense emotional and intellectual connection with another resident quickly. While the psychology behind this phenomenon is more complex than a non-specialist can understand, as a layperson I can turn to the work of experts who are studying virtual worlds to help interpret what I have observed. The emotional intensity of relationships in SL seems to derive from the combination of the appearance of the avatar as a beautiful object created by the user, and the conversations that people have while engaging in the typical activities of shopping and socializing. Something about the process of creating the avatar identity as another version of the self seems to make it easier for residents to want to engage in conversations where they reveal things about themselves that they would not share with new acquaintances in RL. Because self-disclosure between individuals contributes

to building a sense of intimacy, making self-disclosure easier should facilitate relationship formation. Studies previously done by Bargh showed that people were better able to express their "true" selves (those self-aspects they felt were important to their identity but which they were usually unable to present in public) to their partner over the Internet than when face-to-face, and furthermore, that when Internet partners met and liked each other, they tended (more than did the group that met face-to-face initially) to project qualities of their ideal mates onto each other. Both of these phenomena facilitated the building and maintaining of close, intimate, emotional relationships. By contrast, those who violate those expectations of maintaining basic politeness and extending to others some respect by giving them the choice to interact or not, and to also decide the basis of that interaction, do so by abruptly or overtly expecting SLex. The manner of approach also adds to a female avatar's feeling of intimidation or threat, with a sense of her space being invaded.

In her blog, Argent Bury offers a thoughtful *Statement of Principles and Goals* in response to a recent discussion on *Immersionism and Augmentation* that gets at the heart of what brings residents to the SL culture and keeps them participating in it. Her list of about nine rules and descriptions identifies SL as a place where the events that are going on there, and the activities that personalities engage in are her dominant concern—the world itself and the people in it, the ways she interacts with those people in a consistent and coherent identity that exists in the world and behaves in a particular way. Her reflections suggest that as a virtual world, SL has developed a culture of openness that also incorporates some basic standards of conduct that do keep that culture functioning well for most residents. She acknowledges that a big part of the attraction to SL is the freedom from RL constraints, but that more so, that freedom takes the form of creativity, exchanging ideas and having fun. But openness does not mean there are no limits that need to be respected. Bury asserts that fun does not preclude responsible behavior, and that being responsible as an accepted part of the culture of SL makes the world of SL more fun for everyone (something that the griefers of the virtual world don't want to accept, fun is no longer fun, nor is freedom freedom when it impinges on someone else's freedom of movement and choice).¹³ Since Bury positions virtual identity as being starkly separate from real-world identity, she accepts the idea that clear boundaries between RL and SL make sense in order to keep both functioning well, and that maintaining those boundaries (between what she refers to as "the atomic world" and the virtual world) requires honesty in both worlds about relationships, grounded in consistent behavior and clear expectations. Although her choice is a complete separation in the sense of not expecting to carry her virtual relationships into the atomic world, she does not rule out for others that there might be some benefits to a construction of identity that blurs the boundaries between the two worlds. For Bury, building relationships is primary: "Because of all the pleasures I have found in SL things like building something with others, and being needed, and being useful, and being loved are the most fun of all." While the debate between the augmentationists and the immersionists continues, both sides would probably agree that the connections, collaborations and relationships that are made possible online are no less real and deep and life-changing for being made in the very different space of an online world. While this may be a culture with a different set of artifacts needed to negotiate it, the social tools residents bring to virtual reality can both free us from and yet re-connect us to this physical first world.

I am African American and female in this physical reality, and though I don't have to be any of those things in SL, I choose to be. The fact that my profile identifies me as a native New Orleanian gives others something to talk about with me—that they are natives too, or that they have visited there, or that they want to visit, or just that they are curious about what has been happening since Katrina, and talking helps me to make new friends. Through this aspect of my personal identity, my personal and professional interests in New Orleans can come together in both the real and the virtual worlds. With my residence in New Toulouse, a period recreation/role play (RP) of New Orleans, 1900—1920, and my participation in the community forming there, I have a powerful opportunity to continue to explore the questions I have raised in this discussion about constructions of identity and relationships in a virtual world. I was also interviewed by a new SL colleague about my own involvement in New Toulouse (NT) as a professor and as a resident, and considering my answers to those questions helped me to see a fuller role for myself in SL that unites all of my interests.

Conclusion

As someone who had just added significantly to her social network by contacting a number of black women for interviews, and who had also recently become a member of a role-playing group in this specific location, it occurred to me that the typical Caledonian role-player was certainly not going to come in contact with many black SL residents, and in the dedication to role-playing 19th century Great Britain, was not going to be regularly exposed to aspects of contemporary African American culture, let alone historical ones. This particularly became clear to me from seeing two residents, who were clearly white and female in their profiles, appear in NT wearing black skins over their female forms; they wanted to make NT more

historically authentic by playing at being black themselves instead of inviting some black people to role-play. Now, of course, not knowing many black people would make this latter objective rather difficult to fulfill, and so it further occurred to me that perhaps I could be the one to be the bridge between the black women that I had recently met and this role-playing community, and in setting that up, giving black residents a potentially more lasting or more compelling activity to enjoy in SL, while also increasing in a real way, the cultural diversity that NT hopes to portray accurately.

As one final observation, I do also have to say that I found it interesting that the whites passing for black had homes on Poverty Row, homes designed as smaller spaces compared with the other larger residences and commercial spaces, and homes lacking in any appearance of opulence, although historically faithful to the image of the double shotgun architecture. Another concerned and interested friend was quite supportive and encouraging about my asking the builder of the island to upgrade me from one of the double shotguns to a more comfortable and spacious house. At first, I was reluctant to do this, simply because I didn't want to feel ungrateful when I knew how hard she had been working to finish everything, but then, I started to think about how my character should be living, as a teacher in the community, and wondering why the other white residents seemed to naturally assume a connection between blackness and poverty, when that was only one part of the historical experience. Without my presence as a black female, and my role as a teacher, there would have been no representative at all of a significant aspect of New Orleans history and culture, the story of the black Creole middle class, grounded in Catholic identity, formal education, and a tradition of homeownership. Now I have a virtual home of my own, and a multifaceted role to play in the real world as well as in my virtual world, and I can't wait to see what happens next.

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