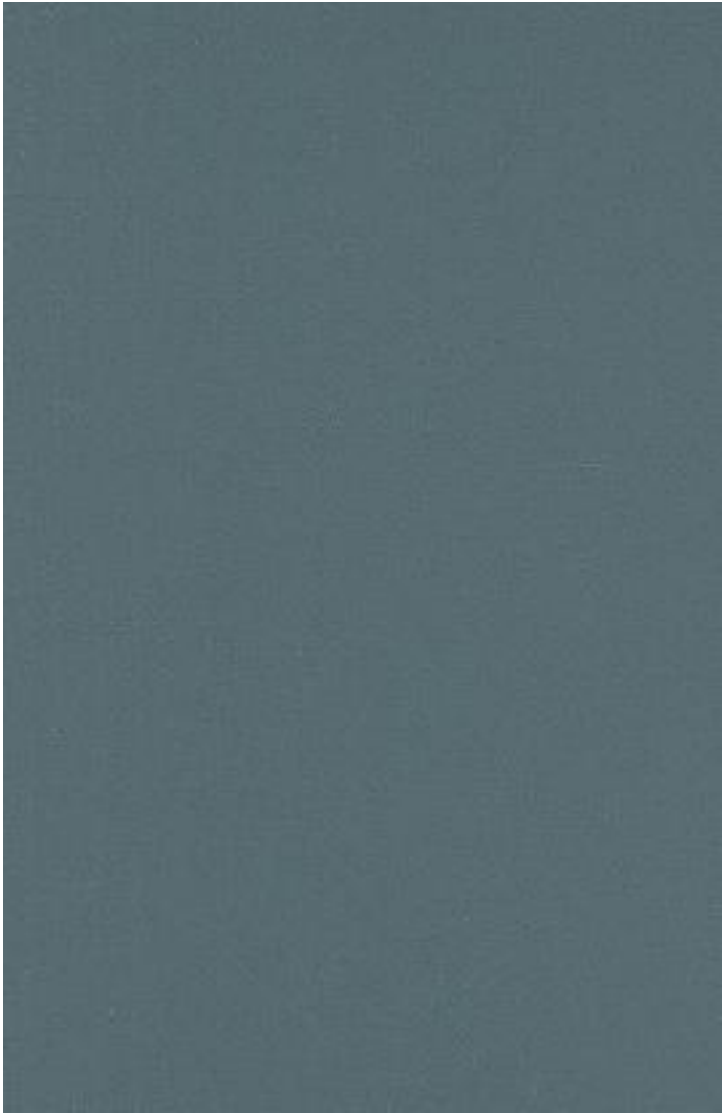


# Online a Lot of the Time



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出版者:

出版时间: 2009-6

装帧:

isbn: 9780822344483

A wedding ceremony in a Web-based virtual world. Online memorials commemorating the dead. A coffee klatch attended by persons thousands of miles apart via Web-cameras. These are just a few of the ritual practices that have developed and are emerging in online settings. Such Web-based rituals depend on the merging of two modes of communication often held distinct by scholars: the use of a device or mechanism to transmit messages between people across space, and a ritual gathering of people in the same place for the performance of activities intended to generate, maintain, repair, and renew social relations. In "Online a Lot of the Time", Ken Hillis explores the stakes when rituals that would formerly have required participants to gather in one physical space are reformulated for the Web. In so doing, he develops a theory of how ritual, fetish, and signification translate to online environments and offer new forms of visual and spatial interaction. The online environments Hillis examines reflect the dynamic contradictions at the core of identity and the ways these contradictions get signified. Hillis analyzes forms of ritual and fetishism made possible through second-generation virtual environments such as Second Life and the popular practice of using Web-cameras to 'lifecast' one's life online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Discussing how people create and identify with their electronic avatars, he shows how the customs of virtual-world chat reinforce modern consumer-based subjectivities, allowing individuals to both identify with and distance themselves from their characters. His consideration of web-cam cultures links the ritual of exposing one's life online to a politics of visibility. Hillis argues that these new 'rituals of transmission' are compelling because they provide a seemingly material trace of the actual person on the other side of the interface.

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