

Introduction to *Mediated Interfaces:* *The Body in Social Media*

Katie Warfield, Carolina Cambre, and Crystal Abidin

An Anecdote (or how not to title a book)

Originally this book was to be named what it is: *Mediated Interfaces*, but we wanted to write it – creatively and imaginatively – as:

#Me-diated (Inter)faces

‘This is so cool!’ we thought to ourselves.

‘How clever are we??’ we giggled and said.

The #Me is a common hashtag on social media signifying personal practices and images of the self and so the title signified at once our personal research interests: selfies (Cambre, 2016; Warfield, 2016a, b, 2017), self-presentation on Instagram (Abidin 2018a, b; Leaver et al., 2019), hook-up apps (Cambre and David, 2016), and tumblr (Warfield, 2020), and political images of faces that circulate subversively online (Cambre, 2016). #Me also reflected some of the core themes we explore in this book: selfhood, social media, identities, the feeling, and fleshy body. The bracketed (inter), in the original title, also signified a play on mediation. *Inter-* derives from the Latin roots meaning ‘into the world’ or ‘into materiality’. It evokes a movement from thought, concept, or theory to matter. From idea to world. And finally, the bracketed *-faces* pointed to the actual fleshy face of the body: the mug, the ‘money maker’, the home of recognition, judgement, categorization, and subsequently social consideration and treatment.

‘What an awesome title!’ we thought contentedly.

‘I can’t wait to see what it looks like on a cover!’ we said.

And then our significantly more astute publisher explained that if we stuck with that title, no one would ever be able to find it. No one would enjoy it. The obscurity or our playful spelling would literally send our book into obscurity.

There is a beautiful irony in this anecdote though. When we chose to cheekily challenge the structure of these core words in our book, when we dared to spell them differently, they became incomprehensible; the logics of search engines and algorithms would deem them uncategorizable and therefore nonsensical. The minute we started to insert functions routinely used in computing into our title words – hashtags to connect and network and brackets to isolate functions in code – was the same minute our print-based language and our message broke down the ability of probability-based and prediction-based machines to compute.

And this is so often what we observe as happening when we move communication to online spaces. Meaning breaks down. Language is no longer linear. Meaning making isn't singular; it's networked and shared. Conventionally coded parameters for ideas, categories, and signification begin to rattle and shake because the way things happen online is incredibly complex, fast, constantly changing, nomadic, and geographically networked to a multitude of online and offline spaces.

What dynamisms contribute to this complexity and to the intricacy with which we consider the body on social media? Discursive forces permeating everyday offline spaces also permeate online spaces and bodies online. Forces related to gender, race, sexuality, ability, and class – tendrils of power – thread through platform communities and cultures, under our skin and through our digital representations. Our bodies and representations are also affected by the materiality of the technologies we encounter. Material affordances entwined with sociocultural conventions shape what we say, how we see, how we self-represent. And finally, feeling and affect piggy back on materiality and are equally entangled within popular and political discourses flowing between and within online and offline spaces. It is this messy, changing, fluid reality concerning the notion of 'being a body on social media' that the diverse range of case studies in this book explore in different ways. The forces that thread through the mediated bodies in this book are discursive, material, and affective – and often all three at once.

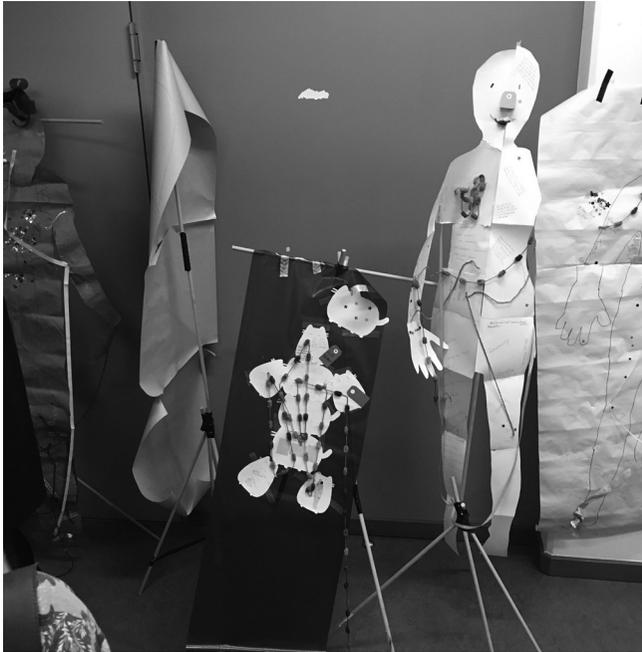
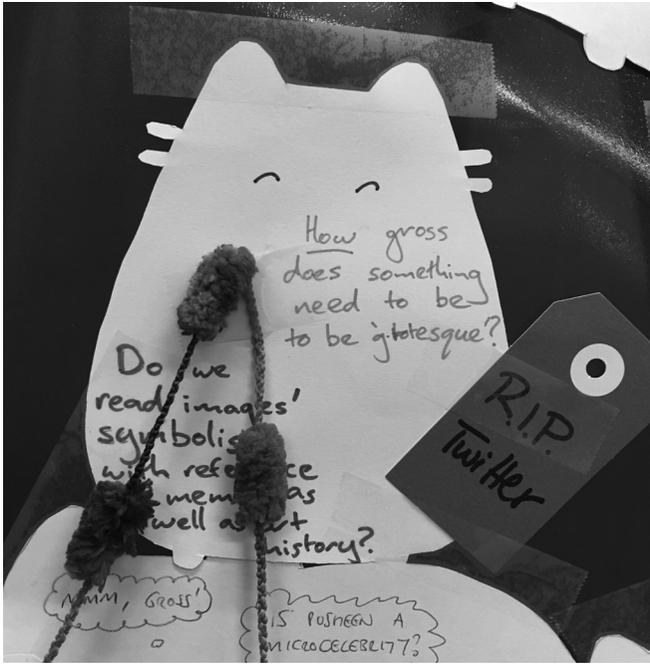
Origin of the book

We were first approached by Bloomsbury to write this book at the 2016 Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) meeting in Berlin, Germany. At that conference we presented a panel on the mediated body where a cohort of

scholars contemplated in creative and playful ways what the socially mediated body was all about. We invited audience members to trace themselves out on brown craft paper and scribble on arms, legs, and heads key themes that crossed over the different talks. We then took colourful yarn and twine and wove the ideas on the distinct paper bodies together. Strings marking terms like 'skin', 'power', 'flesh', and 'feeling' were strung across tables connecting paper hands to paper hips in a wonderful network of ideas literally written on representations of the body. The complex crafty mess came to wonderfully summarize the crafty and complex way we come to present the multiplicities of our bodies on social media.

It is also important to note that this book came about within a lineage of scholarly writing on self-imaging practices on social media, particularly





Figures 1–3 Images of creative thinking at AoIR 2016, Berlin, Germany.

scholarship on selfies. All three of us editors were original members of The Selfies Research Network, a collective of international researchers who came together in 2011, when the phenomenon of the selfie was taking off, and being demonized, in popular culture. Our group interests were to study the social and cultural implications of the selfie. Theresa Senft, the originator of The Selfies Research Network, and Nancy Baym, principal researcher of Microsoft Research New England, then produced a special issue for the *International Journal of Communication Studies* on selfies in 2015, as well as a free online syllabus on selfies. In response to the *IJoC* Special Issue on Selfies, the three editors of this book came together to produce a special issue in the journal *Social Media + Society* on selfies in 2016. As research continued to unfold, and academics continued to explore the phenomenon of selfies, our own work evolved in different ways *beyond selfies* but still fundamentally retaining and interest in the socially and digitally mediated body and the way the body becomes mediated and presented in different ways on different social media platforms online. We have worked closely with the contributors of this book since 2015 to produce this collection of case studies that provide a wide breadth of examples of the complex ways that the body becomes in and through online spaces.

Focus of book

Mediated Interfaces: The Body in Social Media is an edited collection that will broadly investigate the *mediated body in social media*. The book is divided into three parts, which present case studies showing different ways the body is and becomes online. The three parts of the book – (1) The body mediated, (2) The body politicized, (3) The body felt – offer classic and contemporary creative reworkings of these paradigms.

We title these parts specifically to speak to forces that bring the body into being – or, in other words, we are interested in the becoming of socially mediated bodies. In the collective years of our research, we have come to be equally interested in kinds of forces that come to ‘make the body’ or ‘shape the body’ as it comes to be understood online as definitions of what a body is. The body is not only a porous material entity but also beyond flesh and the senses. Bodies can also be seen as curated, calculated, crafted, and computed entities constrained by social systems. We claim that the socially and digitally mediated body is this *and* more. The socially mediated body is an entanglement

of material forces from the influences of technologies, platform designs and affordances, algorithms, and privacy settings. The socially mediated body is also entangled with discourses of power related to the various intersections that shape our body, our identity, and our sense of individual and collective selfhood (gender, race, sexuality, ability, class). And finally, the socially mediated body is also influenced by emotion, feeling, and affect, some of which are socially constructed and 'stick' to us (Ahmed, 2008) whether we like it or not, and others are embodied and felt as radically unique (Salamon, 2010). We consider 'body' not only as the locus of the senses and emotions but also as the nexus of struggle and negotiation between 'unlearned and socially/culturally learned mechanisms of physical control' (Atkinson, 2018: 289).

In other words, the socially and digitally mediated body cannot be reduced to a simple material entity that ends at the skin. Rather, it is more productively understood as a knot in space/time proclaimed in a moment as 'the body' deeply entangled with various complex material, discursive, and affective currents flowing through social media and practices of self-mediation.

This book then pivots around actively understanding the implications of a socially mediated body that refuses common-sense notions that the body can be contained by the contours of the skin and links to the many lineages that see the body as existing often beyond the skin, like theories within sensory studies, phenomenological theory, and trans studies. As such, chapters address the fleshy body like how Tobias Bol describes the way he slowly crafts his flesh into what online audiences deem as 'sexy' on online streaming porn sites, in the understanding of the political centrality of the physical biological body. But chapters also address the body through metaphorical or virtual lenses, as Vince Miller's chapter demonstrates by exploring the impact of how the metaphors of lightness – in descriptions of the digital body – have contributed to the lack of 'weight' we give to the ethics around data collecting on digital bodies. This work calls for better theorizations of online selfhood or personhood vis-à-vis a conceptualization of the body that can serve to protect individuals. Sometimes we speak of the discursive body, like Jing Zeng describes in her chapter on the negative mediated stereotypes, and counter-narratives, of women with PhDs in China, and sometimes we speak of the networked 'sensory body', as Kaye Hare describes in her discussion of online forums attempting to collectively define what male arousal feels like.

Our part titles implicitly hint to how we group authors around what they attend to most: materiality (The body mediated), discursivity (The body politicized),

and affective forces (The body felt). That said, it is impossible to separate the categories because the forces that permeate the chapters often entangle and overlap with one another in intimate and affronting ways. We have divided the book into parts that show intricacies in which the body is shaped by materiality *and* affect, or discourse *and* materiality, or affect *and* discourse, or any other combination. Each of these sections showcase in different ways the complexity of manifold material, discursive, and affective intensities in play in the production of and dissemination of the mediated body on social media. Importantly we want to showcase that these categorizations are neither distinct nor clear. Some chapters demonstrate important ways that discourses flow through and shape the fleshy material body and conversely how offline social imperatives shape online practices in turn. Others show how digital affordances permit and limit the feelings certain bodies are permitted to have. What we see through the palimpsestic trajectory of these chapters are discursive affective instances, material affective moments, and discursive material encounters. In short, we – like other internet scholars of a similar vein (Markham, 1998, Tiidenberg and Markham 2020) – want to show that the becomings of bodies online are not simple processes that can easily be generalized. Rather, we prefer to productively shift our attention from *being online* to thinking of the complex and evolving processes of *becoming online-offline in multi-directional and intermixed ways*.

Contributors and politics of the book

When we came together to write this book, it was of utmost importance that the content of the chapters presented a wide range of geographically located case studies as well as featured scholars at different stages of their academic trajectories. As such we feature very well-known and established scholars alongside emerging scholars, some of whom are still completing their PhDs. We contacted people whose names we knew well and whose work we admired, but we also directly contacted people who unexpectedly wowed us at conferences and academic events. The case studies in these chapters feature work from Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Singapore, and the UK. The chapters also address a range of social media platforms, including BaiduBBS, Daum.net, Facebook, Instagram, KakaoTalk, reddit, Snapchat, tumblr, Twitter, WeChat, Weibo, YouTube, online live streaming porn sites, and online forums. Our chapters also address a range of intersectional populations and politics

including gender, race, sexuality, ability, mental health, disability, religion, and age. The labour involved in working with such a wide range of authors who dedicated years of their time for thankless edits cannot be under-recognized or undervalued. We are so grateful to have worked with such a brilliant group of dedicated authors.

On the becoming of the body

The subtitle of this book is *The Body in Social Media*. As such it is important to theorize what the body is in this publication. In this section we encapsulate an incredibly brief history of the body as conceptualized in scholarly debates and then provide a pivot towards how we theorize the body – as a nomadic fulcrum of material, discursive, and affective forces. Our theorization does not propose anything novel, but rather it provides a reorientation through extension. In this book we are less interested in theorizing ‘what the body is’ and are more interested in looking at some of the complex, situated, and fleeting ways in which the body ‘becomes’ on social media. This orientation distances us from broad ontological propositions about the body – although some are summarized below – and it moves us towards the mechanics of how the body is theorized, how the body becomes materially entangled with technologies, and how the mediated body comes to feel when knotted with different situated forces in social media spaces. We believe that former theorizations deeply inform the way the body becomes online, but the complexities of networked technologies, amidst global networks of sociality and capital, have shifted phenomenological experiences of existential categories, such as time, space, and relation. This shifting complicates notions of body becomings, and attending to this very complexity in motion informs us at once about what we accept as the body as well as broader sociocultural and digital ecologies.

Operationalizing the notion of body calls for some context: What might be included in our discussions of the becoming of the body on social media? The theoretical construct of embodiment has a long interdisciplinary history. And the concept of body demands a no less interdisciplinary effort. As Atkinson (2018) laments, ‘interdisciplinary models of human science are often difficult to achieve in practice as people across said disciplines often find considerable difficulty in sharing languages and modalities of knowing’ (p. 299). More specifically regarding research on embodiment, he expands:

Rarely do these accounts adopt an interdisciplinary tone or ontological flavour ... In short, there are often scarce grounds for interdisciplinary teams to conceptually meet and research on the same theoretical ... playing field. Needed here are truly interdisciplinary research agendas with interdisciplinary implications. As researchers of embodiment are progressively asking interdisciplinary questions and seeking the advice of specialists in fields beyond their own knowledge boundaries, the time is beyond right to pursue existing theoretical scaffolding already buttressed by cross-disciplinary sensitivities. (p. 300)

As one of the first Western social scientists to productively theorize the body, if not the first, Norbert Elias stressed that work on bodies must not only be interdisciplinary but also necessarily be concerned with process. In a foundational piece called 'On human beings and their emotions: A process-sociological essay' published in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Elias described how 'prevailing routines of analytical isolationism' facilitated treating the body as a topic set apart noting that:

There does not seem to be any need to explore the links connecting aspects of humans perceived as body with other aspects perhaps perceived as disembodied ... human sciences ... tacitly work with the image of a split world ... the division of sciences into natural sciences and others not concerned with nature reveals itself as a symbolic manifestation of an ontological belief- of the belief in a factually existing division of the world. (Elias, 1987: 340)

Here Elias elucidates another unique aspect of his approach in that he does not separate the notion of body from that of society but rather presents it processually as responsive to nature/culture inseparably. Indeed, in *The Rediscovery of the Body*, Elias shows 'the relative empirical (let alone theoretical) ridiculousness of separating this or that aspect of the body from the experience of life, and/or the division of the innate regulation mechanisms with learned regulation mechanisms' (Atkinson, 2018: 293).

Just as we propose that the body is a temporally situated fulcrum mediating forces, so too is this book a momentary fulcrum of theories on the body. As such we attempt to hold space and voice for a variety of conceptualizations. While we are limited by space for a thorough examination of this entire history, we recognize that the body, like knowledge, manifests within specific histories of meaning making and specific sociocultural present happenings. Like guiding reins, we knot our fingers around dissimilar theoretical histories to trace a book that shows these realms of scholarship are not distinct and in conflict but rather are deeply entangled and profoundly co-relational.

Each parts and summaries of chapters

1. The body mediated

The chapters in this part show both how bodies on social media are shaped by texts and how they become textual. We focus on how discourses shape how the body becomes on social media but also have things like metaphors shaped how bodies come to be treated in online spaces that spill out in unpredictable ways offline. These chapters also offer case studies pushing back to enact creative performances against discourses of power and against acts that read them as something bodies are not or do not want to be or become. This part is about textuality, but importantly it includes consideration of material and affective considerations in negotiations of textuality or when the body becomes textual/mediated.

This part begins with an extended piece by **Vince Miller**, which aims to frame the problem of privacy and autonomy in digital culture, not as a legal or technical problem but as a problem of ethics related to metaphors of *presence*. Miller argues that the digital abstraction of information has contributed to a sense of ‘absent presence’, whereby information produced by people is abstracted and subsequently devalued, and thus enabling the dilution of ethics vis-à-vis persons themselves. Miller’s in-depth and lengthy analysis suggests that this process occurs via five dominant modes of abstraction: informatization, commodification, depersonalization, decontextualization, and dematerialization. Miller argues that personal information when treated as abstract ‘data’ can be easily divorced from the person and therefore from ethical obligations associated with personhood (or selfhood), effectively allowing the removal of such information from the social sphere of ethics and morals, making it ethically ‘weightless’.

Following the way that bodies become abstracted through discourses and technological treatment, **Emily van der Nagel** discusses how the naked body on Reddit has taken on a novel, creative, and radical mode of abstraction in which the material fleshy body is divorced from other identifying markers classically used by social institutions to count and mark bodies. In this chapter, Van der Nagel delves into different ways to identify an individual. She traces historical documents of identification marking persons, their family, property, finances, and citizenship and links the history of identity verification to political subjectivity. She shows how contemporary online verification processes, like

Twitter, and Weibo, also use classical modes of identification focusing on political identity. She then offers a radical feminist and posthuman mode of verification used on Reddit – a process called *embodied verification* – in which no identity documents are needed; rather the faceless body is often used to confirm the user's identity. This mode of bodily identification, unhinged from political identification, allows users to partake in taboo or political practices against political norms, and which otherwise may have been a risk to their reputation had the images been linked to their political identity.

From individual identities to group identities, in the next chapter, **Hattie Liew** explores the emergence and production of fan practices in social media spaces. In this chapter Liew examines Instagram fan accounts of YouTuber Jojo Siwa (@itsjojosiwa). The chapter shows how fans engage in a variety of presentation and interaction practices on Instagram to establish their fan identity and status, draw boundaries around their fandom, and build user-centric fan archive. Whereas much literature in social media theory shows how microcelebrities craft their brand online, this chapter contributes to studies of the emergence of online fan cultures, the evolving forms of fan communities, and object of fandoms in context of social media platforms.

In the next chapter, we move from creative ways that people contest discourses to an analysis of how the visual vernaculars of YouTube shape brand identities and become deeply guided by consumer prerogatives. Using Couldry and Hepp's (2016) adaptation of Norbert Elias's figuration theory to analyse the video content from Ethan Gamer and Ethan channels, **Carolina Cambre and Maha Abdul Ghani** reveal how children's identity and self-presentation are mediated online. Their analysis indicates that through their use of the Ethan Channels, children are triggered to participate in a space dominated by consumerist norms and values. They use this micro-sociological framework to illustrate how YouTube, as a pedagogical infrastructure for sociality online, disciplines the child vlogger to conform to the norms of YouTube vloggers in order to produce creative performers of implicit advertising.

2. The body politicized

The four chapters in this part address the mediated body in relation to politics and power. These chapters foreground discussions of gender, religion, race, age, capital, and sexuality. The chapters address micro-scale politics to macro-scale analyses. The chapters feature case studies from the UK, China, and Israel and

address technological specifics of different platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and mainstream media outlets. The aim of this part is to focus on how discourses of power thread through the production of individual and networked bodies in social media spaces.

The part begins with a chapter by **Gary Bratchford**, who focuses on how visual activists try to unsettle the visual relations of power, in militarized zones. The chapter begins by looking at the Palestinian Freedom Riders (2011) and their tactical uses of visibility, non-violent resistance, and the potential of circulatory networks they engage to help reframe, or bring into focus, the way Israeli Authorities territorialize space whilst managing Palestinian movement and visibility. The chapter also examines the ways in which Israeli authorities and Jewish settlers in the West Bank have begun to counter the ubiquity of the camera and digital networks by concealing their individual identity.

Contributing to the theme of counter-narratives and counter-actions to power, the next chapter, by **Jessica Ringrose and Kaitlynn Mendes**, narrate how digital space is occupied by women and girls online through photographing and the uploading of experiences of sexism and sexual violence to digital platforms like Tumblr. They suggest that this practice can be a form of loitering, where participants simultaneously take up space and speak out – actions which they argue should be interpreted as forms of resistance. Importantly these scholars trace the online affective tendrils of resistance storytelling but also share empirical evidence of offline spaces in schools and how online movements like #weneedfeminism spread discursively and materially into offline everyday pedagogical spaces.

Social media resistance and counter-narratives continue in the next chapter, where **Jing Zeng** introduces the cultural, social, and political background of the widely existing bias against *nü boshi* in China. *Nü boshi* are women who have or are pursuing their PhD and, as Zeng explains, are discursively chastised as ‘unmarriageable’ and a ‘third gender’. Zeng discusses how social media platforms, like microblog-based campaigns, and live-streaming platforms, followed by a mainstream media pick-up via reality TV and dramatic shows have come to reframe *nü boshi* as desirable and even sexy.

Jungyoun Moon and Crystal Abidin discuss one of the most misunderstood cultural groups in Korean culture: *ajummas*. Roughly translated as women who are married and middle-aged, the *ajummas* are a stigmatized demographic in Korea. Their chapter examines the economic and sociocultural history of *ajummas*, how they are represented in the Korean media and culture, and how

they subsequently self-present via new media technologies to create their own forms of expression and creativity. In mainstream media, *ajummas* historically have been objectified. However, their use of and re-presentation via visual self-representations on social media, like YouTube, have given them the ability to narrate, to a wide audience, a diversity of subject positions.

3. The body felt

In this part we share a series of chapters that focus on the felt body, the affective body, or the way emotions collectively flow and move online to shape and affect mediated bodies.

The part begins with a chapter by **Tobias Bol** on the relations between bodies and ‘their’ images in media practices that involve images of the naked body. Bol provides details and personal narrative of using his own naked body in live streaming, personal messaging, and personal self-imaging practices. For the research Bol became a member of the online erotic webcamming community for about a year and engaged in what he calls ‘autopornogra-phy’. Using original autoethnographic research on mediated sexual interactions among gay men, he shows how physical, lived bodies and their images co-emerge and are visually, sensorially, semiotically, and materially entangled in these erotic media practices. Importantly, Bol argues and illustrates the micro ways in which different forms of embodiment emerge in different situations and with different technological interfaces.

The part moves the individual experience of men’s erotica to the collective production of definitions around what constitutes embodied male arousal. In **Kaye Hare**’s chapter she seeks to explore the dynamics that shape collective meaning making, by exploring men’s digital communications about their felt-sense experiences of sexuality and arousal. She begins by exploring different existing theories about felt-sense, and then she turns to the empirical online spaces of three parallel digital Q&A threads that ask men to explain the bodily experience of arousal: ‘Guys: can you please describe what sexual arousal feels like?’. The threads, which are found on three different open access websites, provide a unique opportunity to analyse the felt-sense expressions within and across the threads. Through attention to storytelling, gendered language, paralanguage, GIFs, SMS language (text language), and metaphors, Hare focuses the analysis on the multiplicity of ways that sociality shapes dialogue and thus the shared production of meaning about the sensory.

The manner in which networked interfaces shape the production of the body – whether sensorially or materially – is covered in the next chapter by **Emma Quilty**, who examines how the naked body of people involved in witchcraft communities in Australia is both shaped in offline carnival spaces and differently shaped in online spaces like Facebook. The detailed ethnographic narratives of participants choosing to be ‘skyclad’ (nude) reveal and make visible in academic literature the embodied experience of witches in offline spaces like *WitchCamps* and carnivals. Quilty bookends the deeply detailed narrative with examples of how witches are both enabled and hindered by online spaces since these spaces allow a vernacular community space to connect between offline meet-ups but deeply restrict practices of nudity due to platform community user agreements that adopt restrictive guidelines around bodily nudity.

In the final chapter of this part, **Katrin Tiidenberg, Gammelby, and Lea Muldtofte Olsen** provide an experimental piece that braids the stories of three bodies: an ill body, a sexual body, and a body whose pain is delegitimized. They query how bodies become in online spaces, forums, and mediated interactions. Just as our bodies become through media, they take things deeper – literally under the skin – to show how these three bodies become socially mediated and that embodiment is a practice that comes to be across a variety of contexts and modalities.

Conclusion

While reading this book we encourage you to think of the chapters as intimately sliding across material, discursive, and affective threads – it is these threads that at once differentiate and distinguish the unique cases we explore but also tie and tangle all the chapters together. We hope to encourage a larger dialogue on the socially and digitally mediated body, what it is, what it means, and how it becomes online.

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