Ever since William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" in his debut novel Neuromancer, *his work has been seen by many as a yardstick for postmodern and, more recently, posthuman possibilities. This article critically examines Gibson's second trilogy (*Virtual Light, Idoru *and* All Tomorrow's Parties*), focusing on the way digital technologies and identity intersect and interact, with particular emphasis on the role of embodiment. Using the work of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and N. Katherine Hayles, it is argued that while William Gibson's second trilogy is infused with posthuman possibilities, the role of embodiment is not relegated to one choice among many. Rather the specific materiality of individual existence is presented as both desirable and ultimately necessary to a complete existence, even in a posthuman present or future.*

"The Infinite Plasticity of the Digital": Posthuman Possibilities, Embodiment and Technology in William Gibson's Interstitial Trilogy

Tama Leaver

> Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies.
> --- Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"
>
> She is a voice, a face, familiar to millions. She is a sea of code ...
> Her audience knows that she does not walk among them; that she is media, purely. And that is a large part of her appeal.
> --- William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties*

<1> In the many, varied academic responses to William Gibson's archetypal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, the most contested site of meaning has been Gibson's re-deployment of the human body. Feminist critic Veronica Hollinger, for example, argued that Gibson's use of cyborg characters championed the "interface of the human and the machine, radically decentring the human body, the sacred icon of the essential self," thereby disrupting the modernist and humanist dichotomy of human and technology, and associated dualisms of nature/culture, mind/body, and thus the gendered binarism of male/female (33). "Human bodies in Gibson's stories," Hollinger argues further, "are subjected to shaping and re-shaping, the human form destined perhaps to become one available choice among many" (35). Conversely, Thomas Foster has argued that Gibson's bifurcation of cyberspace and the material world reifies the mind and devalues the body as surplus "meat." Moreover, far from disrupting the assumptions of humanism, in *Neuromancer*, although they are both cyborgs, the cyberspace cowboy (Case) is male, and the street warrior (Molly) is female, implicitly maintaining the gendered associations of masculinity with the mind, and femininity with the body (Foster 18). As both of these (and most other) analyses of Gibson's cyberpunk novels situate cyborgs as the central signifier of embodiment, in order to map Gibson's development of ideas relating to the body in the Interstitial trilogy, the first question that needs to be asked is: "Where have all the cyborgs gone?"

<2> Ostensibly it appears that there are no cyborgs in Gibson's second trilogy: certainly none of the characters have surgically implanted devices like those sported by Molly in *Neuromancer*. However, Gibson has not discarded cyborgs altogether, but rather relies upon a different concept of what being a cyborg means. Donna Haraway has argued in her ironic "Manifesto for Cyborgs," that everyone in contemporary society is *already* a cyborg. Quickly qualified, Haraway does not suggest we have all become "razor girls" like Molly; nor are we the Borg of *Star Trek*, covered in black latex and biotechnic implants. Rather, physically, we are cyborgs because it is impossible not to become entwined with technology in everyday material existence: immunisation, hearing-aids, telecommunications, computers and calcium-enhanced milk are all examples of technology and the human body hybridising to become cyborgs. More importantly, at a metaphorical level, the interrelation between people and technologies means that there "is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic" (Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto" 178). Thus, as Haraway argues further that "[c]ommunications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial

tools recrafting our bodies" ("Cyborg Manifesto" 164), the recrafting she envisages can be on either a conceptual or a material level (or both). Utilising Haraway's concept of the cyborg, Gibson's characters in his second trilogy are still fundamentally enmeshed with technology, although not necessarily on a permanent physical level. To explore how these new posthuman cyborgs illuminate Gibson's body politics in the Interstitial trilogy (*Virtual Light*, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*) [1], three characters will be examined: Colin Laney, an obsessive data analyst; Zona Rosa, a member of the Lo/Rez digital fan community and close online friend of one of *Idoru*'s protagonists Chia McKenzie; and Rei Toei, the idoru, who is one of the world's most well known faces (and bodies) but has no more materiality than a 'sea of information."

<3> When Colin Laney first appears in *Idoru*, we learn he has a particular affinity with information structures: he has "a peculiar knack with data-collection architectures, and a medically documented concentration-deficit that he could toggle, under certain conditions, into a state of pathological hyperfocus" (25). The result of his talent means that Laney can perceive "nodal points" in the human datascape, which means he can not only locate specific information faster than almost anyone else, but also that he can comprehend the movement of data in such a way which he can see emerging structures - the ability not so much to predict the future, as to map the likely outcomes of patterns in the datascape which only he can see [2]. Laney's talents are not natural, but rather the results of the drug "5-SB," for which he was a test subject while in a Gainesville orphanage some years earlier. A side effect of the drug was that recipients tended to become fixated not only with information but also with a single media figure, such as an actor or politician, thus 5-SB became "one of the most illegal substances, any damn country you care to look at" (Gibson, *Idoru* 133). By the beginning of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the 5-SB has "kicked in" and Laney has become obsessed with Cody Harwood, the world's most powerful man, who is trying to control the shape of the future and is involved in a project which will change the world or, as Laney perceives it, Harwood is behind "the mother of all nodal points" (Gibson, *ATP* 4). As Laney's obsession and his tracking of Harwood continue, Laney's sense of self no longer involves embodiment: "Laney's progress through all the data in the world (or that data's progress through him) has long since become what he is, rather than something he merely does" (Gibson, *ATP* 163). Ostensibly, Laney appears to be gripped by what Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein have called "the will to virtuality," which is the narcissistic and nihilistic "will to surrender oneself to technologically-mediated and externalised imaginaries," and to completely ignore and deny the material body (41). The "will to virtuality" also seems evident in Gibson's earlier work, especially in the oft-criticised console cowboy characters.

<4> In the Interstitial trilogy, Colin Laney is the character most similar to Case, the console cowboy in *Neuromancer*. Case is far more obviously gripped by the "will to virtuality" than Laney: for Case the only world worth knowing was "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace"; correspondingly, "the body was meat," and when forced to live outside of cyberspace, Case "fell into a prison of his own flesh" (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 12). Moreover, Case's experience of cyberspace is both pleasurable and fulfils many of his normal bodily urges: when he finally does "jack in" to cyberspace, it is a highly charged almost sexual experience, resulting in "tears of release, streaming down his face" (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 69). From these passages, Thomas Foster's argument that *Neuromancer* presents a "devaluation" of the human body appears convincing as Case not only prefers cyberspace over the material world, but actively attempts to spend all his time there, with little or no ramifications for his ignored material body (18-19). However, while Laney ostensibly identifies with the datascape as strongly as Case, there is a shift in the way Laney's embodiment is represented.

<5> For Laney, the "will to virtuality" is not so much an indulgent choice, as it was for Case, but rather the result of the particularly powerful drug, 5-SB. While Case's time in cyberspace has no lasting negative effects on his material body, Laney, by contrast, is so obsessed with the datascape and tracking Harwood that he spends *all* his time online, he no longer sleeps, or eats properly, is physically ill, and lives, hiding, in a cardboard box in a Japanese railway station (Gibson, *ATP* 1-6; 79). As much as Laney would like to deny his physical body, sometimes he

is unable, and then he "is suddenly and terribly aware of his physical being, the condition of his body. His lungs failing in a cardboard carton in the concrete bowels of Shinjuku Station" (Gibson, ATP 178). Moreover, while Case is free to return to a normal embodied existence at the conclusion of his adventure, Laney is not: as the alliance of which Laney is part manages to stop Harwood's plan, Laney dies in "the dark in his fetid box," his body exhausted (Gibson, *ATP* 260). The different ramifications of the "will to virtuality" for Case and Laney mark a change in Gibson's representation of embodiment. In the Sprawl trilogy, the human body is "devalued," and can be completely forgotten without serious consequences. However, in the Interstitial novels, the "will to virtuality" is not so much a choice, as the result of a debilitating addiction spurred on by drugs. Laney's addiction to the datascape is similar to Berry Rydell's "image addiction" (his life is overtly directed by his father's obsession with the television show *Cops in Trouble* [Gibson, *ATP* 85; 182]), but as the datascape has far more media depth, so too are the consequences of the addiction far more serious. Laney's resulting physical illness and eventual death illuminate Gibson's position that the material body cannot simply be discarded or forgotten and that "will to virtuality," at an extreme, is a terminal impulse.

<6> One of Chia McKenzie's closest friends in *Idoru* is Zona Rosa, although it turns out the two girls actually speak different languages and have never met face to face in the physical world. Zona and Chia are members of the Lo/Rez fan club, a collection of fans who geographically live great distances apart, but who manage to meet regularly. Their meetings take place online in virtual reality environments, where each participant is represented by their own virtual body, or "avatar," which they control [3]. In Zona's material existence she claimed to be "the leader of a knife packing *chilanga* girl gang. Not the meanest in Mexico City, maybe, but serious enough about turf and tribute" (Gibson, *Idoru* 12). Thus, while Chia was happy to have an avatar that looked like "only a slightly tweaked, she felt, version of how the mirror told her she actually looked," Zona, by contrast, chose to represent herself as a "blue Aztec death's-head burning bodiless, ghosts of her blue hands flickering like strobe-lit doves … [with] lightning zig-zags … around the crown of the neon skull" (Gibson, *Idoru* 11-12). Just as important, their chosen avatar software included an "instantaneous on-line translation" routine, so each girl could understand the other, even if their languages were different (Gibson, *Idoru* 11). Gibson's description of virtual reality communication illuminates an online world where communication technologies not only bridge geographical and linguistic barriers, but also add a visual depth to communication that is unavailable through other media. Karen Cadora has argued the use of avatars and the development of virtual reality as "a space which must be navigated with a body of some sort" marks a digital arena where the "realities of the flesh" still have certain posthuman resonance (364-5). Certainly, these digital bodily images are more important in the Interstitial trilogy than in the Sprawl novels, since in the cyberspace envisioned in *Neuromancer*, navigation and existence in cyberspace was through a completely disembodied point of view. For Zona Rosa, however, her embodied existence as an avatar is even more meaningful.

<7> During the climax of *Idoru*, Zona comes to Chia's aid in the digital world. In order to force the owner of another website to aid Chia's cause, Zona uses an illegal software weapon that briefly gives her control of that website. In the aftermath, the Etruscan, a virtual citizen of the Walled City [4] (a digital city located outside of the restrictions of the mainstream internet), and Rei Toei, the idoru, explain to Chia that Zona is gone:

> "But they"ve only shut down her website," Chia said. "She's in Mexico
> City, with her gang."
> "She is nowhere," the Etruscan said. (Gibson, *Idoru* 284)

When Zona used the software weapon, she exposed the location of her website to the pursuing authorities, forcing her to abandon it. However, as the Etruscan tells it, that was not enough:

> "They pursued her. She was forced to discard her persona."
> "What "persona"?" Chia felt a sinking feeling.
> "Zona Rosa," said the Etruscan, "was the persona of Mercedes Purissima
> Vargas-Gutierrez. She is twenty-six years old and the victim of an

environmental syndrome occurring most frequently in the Federal District
of Mexico."
… "Then I can find her," Chia said.
"But she would not wish this," the idoru said. "Mercedes Purissima is
severely deformed by the syndrome, and has lived for the past five years
in almost complete denial of her physical self." (Gibson, *Idoru* 285).

<8> In "Zona Rosa," we can see evidence of Donna Haraway's argument that 'severely
handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of
complex hybridization with other communication devices" (Haraway, "Cyborg
Manifesto" 178). Where Laney's body was negatively impacted by his obsession with
the datascape, by contrast virtual reality provided Mercedes Purissima with
crucial tools to digitally refashion her embodied image. Through the "Zona Rosa"
persona, she was able to live a life more in line with her own choices rather than
an existence dominated by the fact of her physically disfigured form. Moreover,
the story of Zona Rosa illuminates Gibson's alliance with Scott Bukatman's
argument that the "imagined" realities of the digital world may deconstruct
existing notions of subjectivity, but "[s]uch a deconstruction does not point to
the *annihilation* of subjectivity, but rather to the limits of the existing
paradigm" (180). For Mercedes Purissima her posthuman notions of subjectivity
include elements of identity informed in a technologically mediated digital realm,
a locale far more flexible to her needs than the material world where her physical
condition would dominate. Moreover, the juxtaposition of characters like Laney and
"Zona," illuminates "the infinite plasticity of the digital" -- an expression
borrowed from Gibson which I am using to capture the idea that emerging
technologies and digital spaces are expanding and challenging the limits of
subjectivity, but also that such broadening is not intrinsically positive or
negative, but rather becomes "good" or "bad" due to the specific circumstances in
which these technologies are deployed (Gibson, *ATP* 117). Thus for Laney, his
obsession with the datascape ultimately proved to be his downfall, whereas for
Mercedes Vargas-Gutierrez technologies provide the means to lead a fuller life,
not as restricted by the disabilities which have inflicted her embodied form. Nor
does the "death" of Zona Rosa end the usefulness of these technologies. Although
Mercedes had to relinquish the "Zona" persona to avoid detection by the police,
there is nothing stopping her from creating a new persona. As Arleigh explained to
a saddened Chia, eventually 'somebody else would turn up, somebody new, and it
would be like they already knew you" (Gibson, *Idoru* 291).

<9> Investigating the subjectivity and embodiment, or lack thereof, of Rei Toei
proves a somewhat more difficult task in that she does not possess a material body
and may ostensibly be considered no more than an extremely complex array of
information and communications software. When Yamazaki first describes Rei to
Laney, he explains she is a virtual singer, an "idoru": ""Idol-singer." She is Rei
Toei. She is a personality-construct, a congeries of software agents, the creation
of information-designers. She is akin to what I believe they call a 'synthespian,"
in Hollywood" (Gibson, *Idoru* 92). However, in *All Tomorrow's Parties* when Rei
appears to Rydell in holographic form, she claims that "this is a hologram … but I
am real" (153). Rei's reality or sentience is a point of contention in the
Interstitial trilogy: for some Rei is simply the latest and most advanced
'software dolly wank toy"; but for others she represents an "original concept …
almost radical," complete with the intrinsic ability to think for herself and
define her own existence (Gibson, *Idoru* 122; 144). When Colin Laney first meets
her he anticipates 'some industrial-strength synthesis of Japan's last three dozen
top female media faces. That was usually the way in Hollywood, and the formula
tended to be even more rigid [for software creations] … their features
algorithmically derived from some human mean of proven popularity" (Gibson, *Idoru*
175). However, Laney realises 'she was nothing like that," and when they are
introduced for Laney "the eyes of the idoru, envoy of some imaginary country, met
his" (Gibson, *Idoru* 176). Ostensibly, the idea of a purely informatic construct
being sentient appears ridiculous, but as Donna Haraway has pointed out,
contemporary developments such as the Human Genome Project are founded on the
premise that a human being can be reduced to "an information structure that can
exist in various physical media" (*Modest_Witness* 246).

<10> In Dani Cavallaro's recent analysis of Gibson's work, she implicitly
concludes that Rei does not have a legitimate individual identity, but is simply

an object or thing, evinced in references to Rei as "the idoru" or "it," rather than 'she' (79-83). However, utilising Judith Butler's idea of performativity, I would argue that Rei's discursive identity is sufficiently legitimate to warrant her own chosen gender identity. Butler has argued in her *Gender Trouble* that while much recent feminist criticism has focused on "gender" as a construction which is opposed to a biological bedrock of sex, in actuality 'sex" is just as constructed as "gender". For Butler there is no pre-discursive reality. Butler argues that identity and gender are "performative," created and maintained through the repetitions of day to day existence. She argues further that the performance of gender is what *constitutes* the idea of a pre-discursive "sex." In other words, gender comes first through repeated performance and "sex" is created as a *product* of these performances (134-141). Rei reflects Butler's idea of performativity brilliantly: she is not "real" but a discursive entity; she *performs* her gender and that performance is what positions the arbitrary selection of her "sex." Following Butler's post-structuralist theory, Rei's discursive identity appears as legitimate as anyone else's since all identity is discursive and defined not through materiality, but through performativity.

<11> By contrast, N. Katherine Hayles argues that reducing "the body" to a "primarily, if not entirely, linguistic and discursive construction" is one of the postmodern beliefs that will "stupefy" and confound future generations ("Materiality" 147). For Hayles, a discursive body only makes sense as a universalised concept, and cannot address the specificities of individual identity (152). She argues that it is impossible to meaningfully separate consciousness from embodiment as the mechanisms of thought and cognition and intrinsically interwoven with "the specifics of place, time, physiology and culture" (155). Hayles' concerns are addressed to some extent through Rei's part in the final showdown with Cody Harwood in *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

<12> One of the main points of contention between Harwood and the group rallied against him, which included Rei, was the deployment of a device called a "nanofax" which was installed in stores across the world. The nanofax employs nanotechnology -- the technological ability to rearrange matter at the molecular level according to an outside design -- the implications of which are that given the necessary raw materials, *anything* can be created. Harwood, who understands the radical implications of the nanofax, explains that he wishes to control the device's deployment so that he can usher "the advent of a degree of functional nanotechnology in a world that will remain recognisably descendant from the one I woke in this morning" (Gibson, *ATP* 250). However, Harwood's plans are defeated, and when the first Nanofax is sent, Rei manages to insert herself -- essentially an elaborate "sea of code" at this point -- into the Nanofax's assembly routine so that when the light "above the hatch turns green, and the hatch slides up … out crawls, unfolds sort of, this butt-naked girl" (Gibson, *ATP* 268). Moreover, the process is replicated across the world so that literally thousands of completely material and (to all appearances) entirely human, or at least posthuman, Rei Toei's have transgressed the boundary between the material and the digital to emerge, completely embodied, into the "real" world. In terms of Gibson's position on embodiment, Rei's transformation illuminates the fact that while Rei's initial characterisation may support Butler's idea of discursive performativity, her eventual decision to leave the digital realm for the material world shows Gibson's ultimate allegiance is to the embodied material form as a necessary and significant site of identity. Moreover, as the virtual disembodied Rei could be considered the ultimate expression of the bodiless existence, her desire and decision to become materially embodied illuminates Gibson's thorough rejection of the "will to virtuality." Through Rei's transformation, Donna Haraway's notion that "[c]ommunications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies," becomes both a conceptual and literal reality.

<13> Ever since *Neuromancer* shook up the academic and popular cultural worlds alike, William Gibson's writing has been utilised as a yardstick firstly for postmodern and more recently posthuman possibilities. Central to these explorations are rearticulations of the role of embodiment, a role which appears comparatively more integral in the Interstitial trilogy than Gibson's earlier novels. As Hayles has argued in *How We Became Posthuman*, one of the key characteristics of the posthuman is that the body is treated as the "original prosthesis," a prosthetic which contains the informatic pattern of posthuman

subjects, but which is not integral to them (3). In direct contrast, while the cyberspace cowboy Case in *Neuromancer* may have aligned with this version of the posthuman subject, implicitly devaluing the body as "meat," in the Interstitial trilogy the character Colin Laney is similarly dismissive of his biological body, gripped by the "will to virtuality," but this form of subjectivity proves fatal. Laney's negative and ultimately terminal engagement with technology is juxtaposed with Mercedes/Zona Rosa's engagement which is greatly enriched by her hybridisation with digital communication technologies. The spectrum formed by their experience illuminates the "infinite plasticity of the digital" -- the idea that for posthuman subjects, technology is neither intrinsically positive or negative, but rather technology facilitates a range of new posthuman possibilities and outcomes which only become "good" or "bad" depending on the specific circumstances of their deployment. However, integral for these newly emerging subjectivities is the ubiquity of technology; bodies and technologies are inextricably entwined. Moreover, Rei Toei's transition from a sentient "sea of code" to a fully embodied individual illuminates the view that the human body and embodiment remain both *necessary and desirable* elements of emerging forms of posthuman subjectivity. The implications of nanotechnology, however, point to further destabilisation of that subjectivity, shifting away from a humanist conception where organic and mechanical are oppositional ideas, to a posthuman world where nanotech places both human and technological as part of the same ontological spectrum. These radical changes in embodiment in terms of ontology, epistemology and material existence could be considered evidence that posthuman subjects are subjects in flux, subjects with "interstitial bodies," where the meanings and actualities around the human body have moved away from a modernist and humanist conception to an "in between" stage where the posthuman body is fixed in neither a conceptual or material sense.

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Notes

[1] Although William Gibson's novel *Virtual Light* is not explicitly utilised in the following paper, the novel is the first in the loose trilogy, and sets the scene for both *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*. The reasoning behind the label "the Interstitial Trilogy" will become apparent below. [^]

[2] Gibson's explanation of "nodal points" and Laney's predictive ability almost sounds mystical, and has gained Gibson some criticism for not basing his idea in some form of science. In response to these accusations, Gibson has explained that Laney's skills are based on his "very, very superficial and imperfect take on chaos theory and fractal geometry" (Gibson interviewed in Daring). [^]

[3] The term avatar has been used to describe "the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other" in virtual reality recently, for example, in the post-cyberpunk novel by Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (35). [^]

[4] For a detailed analysis of the spatial politics and operations of the Walled City and other spaces in the Interstitial trilogy see Tama Leaver, "Interstitial Spaces and Multiple Histories in William Gibson's *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*." [^]