

1. Race in Cyberspace

An Introduction

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Cyberspace is an environment comprised entirely of 0's and 1's: simple binary switches that are either off or on. No in-between. No halfway. No shades of gray. All too often, when it comes to virtual culture, the subject of race seems to be one of those binary switches: either it's completely "off" (i.e., race is an invisible concept because it's simultaneously unmarked and undiscussed), or it's completely "on" (i.e., it's a controversial flashpoint for angry debate and overheated rhetoric). While there are similar patterns of silence about race when it comes to interpersonal interaction in "the real world," the presence of visual and aural markers of race (no matter how inaccurate those may be) means that race is rarely (if ever) as invisible offline as it is in cyberspace.

Moreover, those relatively rare moments online when the race switch is "on" are often characterized by a perverse reversal of the notion that "the personal is the political," insofar as they involve the reduction of pressing political issues of race and racism to purely personal arguments and *ad hominem* attacks. For example, a few years ago, one of us inadvertently started a flame war by making a post to a scholarly listserv to the effect that race is a social construct rather than a biological or genetic fact.¹ Significantly, the uproar that

followed wasn't based primarily in disputes over issues of fact (as might have been the case if the posting had claimed the world is flat) or interpretation (as might have been the case if the topic at hand had been whether Hamlet is really mad or not) as much as it was centered around questions of ethics. From the perspective of the "race is biological" crowd, the posting wasn't only inaccurate: it also posed a grave moral threat to Truth, Justice, and the Academic Way. All of which rapidly led the discussion away from the subject at hand (i.e., the nature of racial categorization) and in the direction of the potential harm caused by the propagation of such irresponsible ideas in public. From an initial response claiming that the social constructionist view of race did "severe damage" to "the field of critical inquiry," the discussion degenerated rapidly to a point where the author of the offending posting was denounced as a dangerous relativist who didn't believe in the real world, a politically correct deconstructionist spouting patently false "fringe" theories, and a raving lunatic who thought that a white couple could produce a baby with brown skin and epicanthic folds.

Very briefly, the social constructionist view of race argues that there is no biological or genetic basis for dividing the world's population into distinct racial groups. While we typically see racial difference residing in physical traits that *are* genetically determined (e.g., skin color, hair texture and color, nose and eye shapes, etc.), attempts to map out those traits across the world's population (a) generate patterns that don't match up with the racial categories we already have, and (b) don't add up to coherent patterns that would support *any* model of people as racially distinct from one another. Moreover, there is more genetic variance within allegedly homogenous racial groups than there is between supposedly distinct groups—which simply wouldn't happen were the differences between those groups rooted in biology. It bears emphasizing, however, that the socially constructed nature of race *doesn't* mean that our understanding of race and racial categories isn't somehow real or that it doesn't have real effects: quite the contrary, those categories *do* exist and they have tangible (and all too often deadly) effects on the ways that people are able to live their lives. What it *does* mean, however, is that the systems of racial categorization that permeate our world are derived from culture, not nature. Back to our story.

Part of what was notable about this mini-flame-war was how tenaciously many of the people involved clung to the idea that race simply *must* be rooted in biology, and how any claims to the contrary—no matter how calmly stated, well documented, or logical they might be—had to be thoroughly beaten

down so that they could never surface again. Early in the debate, the author of the original post noted that there are dramatic differences in the ways that different cultures use and understand racial categories. For example, in the United States, the racial category "black" is understood to be limited to people whose ancestry can be traced to Africa, but the "same" category in South Africa *doesn't* include people of mixed African and European ancestry (who are seen as "colored"), while in Britain, the "same" category also includes people with ancestral ties to non-African parts of the former empire (including Pakistan and China). One can find similar shifts in racial categorization over time as well. Terms like "mulatto," "quadroon," and "octoroon" used to be more prominent in U.S. culture, reflecting an understanding of racial "mixing" similar to that embodied in the South African use of "colored." Similarly, turn-of-the-century immigrants to the United States from certain parts of Europe (most notably Ireland and Italy) were often seen to belong to their own (nonwhite) racial groups. What these examples help to demonstrate is that the various ways people conceive of "race" are rooted, not in nature, but in culture: if race were purely a natural thing, there wouldn't be such variation across time and space in people's understanding of racial difference. Somehow, though, in the hurly-burly of the flame war, such examples were magically explained away as *proof* that genetic distinctions between races really existed, as if the existence of racial categories across cultures could only be possible if race transcended culture.

Moreover, citations of both scholarly (e.g., Frankenberg, Gates, Ignatiev and Garvey, Omi and Winant) and popular (e.g., Leslie et al.; Morgenthau; Rensberger; Wright) research offered in support of the social constructionist argument were never challenged directly (e.g., "I've read that article by Gates, and this is where I'd say his argument goes astray..."). Instead, in an astoundingly anti-intellectual move for a scholarly listserv, those citations were simply brushed aside on the grounds that lots of "foolish things" get published by irresponsible authors and presses. The tone used to dismiss these articles made it clear that the list members in question felt *compelled* to ignore such texts, because to do otherwise would be to take the social constructionist argument seriously enough to grant it a moral and intellectual status it didn't deserve.

In the end, the vigor and venom with which the social constructionist argument was attacked seemed to represent nothing so much as the desire to turn the binary race switch back to its "off" position. The "race is biological" argument was never presented as a more productive means of wrestling with difficult questions of race, politics, and culture; rather, its proponents seemed

intent on nothing so much as killing off the race thread entirely so that the list could return to safer, less controversial topics. Which, sadly, is exactly what happened: though no one ever officially proclaimed race to be an unacceptable topic for discussion, for months afterward even the most innocent and “safe” references to race were regularly met with snotty asides about how “we don’t want to go into all *that* again.”²

One of the primary rationales behind this book, however, is not only that we *do* want “to go into all that,” but that we *need* to do so. To be sure, as many white people point out when faced with questions of racial politics, race shouldn’t matter.³ While we sympathize with the noble belief in egalitarian tolerance at the heart of such a response, we also recognize that the way the world *should* work and the way the world *does* work are two very different things—and that we live in a world that doesn’t come anywhere close to that ideal. Whether we like it or not, in the real world, race *does* matter a great deal. As Tara McPherson argues in her study of neo-Confederate websites, even deliberate and conscious efforts to elide questions of race online can manage to create unmistakably racialized spaces. While many of these sites make an explicit point of distancing themselves from—and even denouncing—the Klan and other white supremacist groups, McPherson notes that neo-Confederate efforts to preserve and protect Southern heritage invoke a very selective and predominantly white version of that heritage. As her chapter shows, the virtual reality that is cyberspace has often been construed as something that exists in binary opposition to “the real world,” but when it comes to questions of power, politics, and structural relations, cyberspace is as real as it gets.

Moreover, in spite of popular utopian rhetoric to the contrary, we believe that race matters no less in cyberspace than it does “IRL” (in real life). One of the most basic reasons for this is that the binary opposition between cyberspace and “the real world” is not nearly as sharp or clean as it’s often made out to be. While the mediated nature of cyberspace renders invisible many (and, in some instances, all) of the visual and aural cues that serve to mark people’s identities IRL, that invisibility doesn’t carry back over into “the real world” in ways that allow people to log in and simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives. You may be able to go online and not have anyone know your race or gender—you may even be able to take cyberspace’s potential for anonymity a step further and masquerade as a race or gender that doesn’t reflect the real, offline you—but neither the invisibility nor the mutability of online identity make it possible for you to escape your “real world” identity completely. Consequently, race matters in cyber-

space precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline, and we can’t help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on.

In much the same way that online discourse has typically kept the binary switch of race in the “off” position (or worked very hard to turn that switch back off when it gets turned on), academic work on cyberspace has been surprisingly silent around questions of race and racism. To be sure, part of this has to do with the newness of scholarly work in this area. The critical field of cyberspace studies is still young enough to be uncertain of its name. Various referred to as “cyberculture,” “cyberspace,” “online life,” or “virtual culture,” life with computer technology is still being defined. Ten years ago, there was almost no scholarship that sought to investigate the particular technology of cyberspace and how it affects configurations of community and identity. In the past five years, however, there’s been a steadily increasing number of books and articles focusing on cyberspace, both from a broad range of academic perspectives and in more popular venues. Still, for all the diversity to be found in these approaches to virtual culture, the bulk of the growing body of literature in cyberspace studies has focused on only a handful of issues and arguments, in ways that have effectively directed the conversation on cyberculture away from questions of race.

The most prominent of these arguments is the by now familiar assertion that online environments facilitate fragmentation of identity. Mark Poster, Allucquère Rosanne Stone, and Sherry Turkle (to name but a very few) began writing in the early to mid-1990s about the multiple and dispersed self in cyberspace—a fluid subject that traversed the wires of electronic communication venues and embodied, through its virtual disembodiment, postmodern subjectivity. These and other scholars have, through their work, established an intellectual center for cyberspace theory; as researchers from disparate fields approach the question of how communication technologies reconfigure notions of identity and human relations, the disembodied figure is often the starting point.⁴

As the central question regarding subjectivity online becomes more thoroughly explored, the variety of arguments made in the field will increase. Cyberspace is in many ways a semiblack slate upon which users write. Technological artifacts provide us with particular starting points, but within that framework—a blank webpage, an empty chat room, an unformed public policy—individuals are responsible for how they work with the empty space. The interactive environments of cyberspace are particularly notable for the

extent to which a virtual identity is constructed within them. To have a virtual presence means deliberately constructing an identity for yourself, whether it is choosing an e-mail name, putting together a webpage, designing a graphical avatar, or creating a nickname for a chat room or virtual world. Within such a constructivist environment, the construction of identity becomes even more important.

Looking at cyberspace as a constructivist environment has led to research that considers the situatedness of the disembodied cyberself. That is, because the self that exists in cyberspace is the result of purposeful choices, it is possible to trace those decisions back, from the avatar (or virtual projection) to the person who first chose to represent herself in a particular way. Within this area of inquiry there are two questions that are most often examined—that of the cyberself as embodied in language, and of the cyberself situated in gender. Both the language and gender choices of participants hold fruitful possibility for examining the connections between virtual and offline life.

Of the two, the dispersed self is more rarely considered to be a linguistic self—despite the fact that many cyberspace interactions are in some way textual. And while those versions of cyberspace that are more visual provide another set of issues than the text-based venues of e-mail or chat groups, even a website or a graphical virtual world remains a site of communicative exchange, one in which participants are embedded in a rhetorical relationship. Lanita Jacobs-Huey's essay "...BTW, How do YOU Wear Your Hair? Identity, Knowledge and Authority in an Electronic Speech Community" is one of the few works addressing how participants in cyberspace make claims about racial identity in a "discussion, which aside from typed text, provides no visual or audio cues to participants' identities" (1). Jacobs-Huey opens up an important line of inquiry regarding how identity and positionality are communicated via language, and she demonstrates how race and identity are concretely tied to language.

Mark Warschauer and Joe Lockard continue this line of inquiry as they examine, in very distinct ways, how ethnicity and language are variously enacted in and constitutive of cyberspace. Warschauer traces some of the roots of how language materially affects ethnic and racial identity in personal and political terms, and he establishes a basis for considering how language affects cyberspace interactions and constructions. In a study of Hawaiian language students at the University of Hawaii, Warschauer investigates the connection between the Hawaiian language and students' sense of identity as Hawaiians, and he examines language revitalization efforts that use the Internet. Lockard

examines some of the more conflicted turns in the development of the Internet. Detailing a techno-universalism that leads to a kind of online nationalism, he also illustrates how cyber-English and the effaced raciality within disembodied virtual communities disregard the material and political identities of participants. Both these essays focus attention on the limits of fragmentation within virtual space by invoking the encasement of the self within language.

In conjunction with considerations of dispersed selves in cyberspace as situated in language, other material elements of identity have been added to the conversation. Participants in cyberspace, it turns out, are not just embedded in language, but tied to gender; in other words, they bring a variety of their real-world identities to bear on cyberspace representation. As Susan Herring's research in the field of linguistics has illustrated, examining electronic discourse communities demonstrates that online communication can be particularly gendered; computer-mediated communication does not exist independent of face-to-face patterns of communication. Placing virtual identities within both language and gender, Herring provides a clear argument for re-embodiment of the virtual self. She is one of several researchers who have examined the way gender affects online interactions, and in the larger body of such scholarship it becomes clear that a user's gender materially affects the range and kind of experiences within cyberspace.

Such analyses of gender online have significant ties to more generally feminist work that examines the effects of technology and technologized interactions on participants. In contrast to Herring's and others' work that is more grounded in considering how we carry gender relations to technology, another strain of work by feminists has examined how technology provokes us to carry new gender formations into daily life. One of the main starting points for such scholarship has been the concept of the cyborg, popularized for feminists studying gender and technology by Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs."

Haraway's article posits a postgender as well as a posthuman subject in the age of high technology, a formulation that provides fertile ground for politicizing cyberspace. The liberatory and progressive potential of an identity choice that is the cyborg—which is hybrid, fluid, fractured, and above all post-modern—has stimulated much valuable discussion, primarily focused on the nature of gender in cyberspace. If nobody knows your gender in cyberspace, a reading of Haraway seems to tell us, then perhaps while using the Internet you can enact that cyborg identity and be, at least in part, liberated from the constraints of gender.

In their writings about virtual sex, for example, Turkle, Stone, and Shannon McRae have each discussed the cross-dressing facilitated by online interaction. Users can adopt a different gender and purportedly learn what it is like to interact in the face-to-face world within another gender role. But in their tellings of such masquerades these authors subscribe to the schema of the cyborg, and they discuss the cross-dressers as experiencing another gender from *within* their RL (real life) stance; the regendered may be masked, but their online journeys are mapped onto an offline biological (and hormonal) self.

The fact that the cyborg's existence is simultaneously material and political is absolutely crucial to the influence of Haraway's text. And because of this focus on the material, analyses of cyborgian existence have been well adapted to political readings. However, just as first- and second-wave feminists often failed to include race and the issue of third world women in their politics, so too have many cyberfeminists elided the topic of race in cyberspace. This state of things represents the norm rather than an aberration; there is very little scholarly work that deals with how our notions of race are shaped and challenged by new technologies such as the Internet.⁵ Haraway situated the cyborg within a complex and broad matrix of identity, but scholarship has focused primarily on the gender of that cyborg rather than other elements of its identity.

Significantly, Haraway's manifesto does present explicitly a politics of race and technology, one that has been little discussed. For the cyborg is not only a hybrid of machine and organism, it is also a racial hybrid. The cover art for Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* depicts a dark-haired woman of indeterminate race sitting at a computer keyboard. This woman, like Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, is an avatar of ethnic and racial hybridity, a vision of a racially "queered" utopian future. Her face is framed by a cathode-ray tube depicting whirling models of galaxies and astrological charts, and her torso is represented by an integrated circuit surrounded by pink flesh. Her body is pointedly depicted as a collage of the human and the machine: it represents an integrated circuit of raciality. The cyborg's politics is one of inclusivity, and as we all become cyborgs in the age of high technologies such as the Internet, so too must race be considered as part of the mix of hybrid identities that mark our selves at the end of the millennium.

Jennifer González discusses how, in sites such as Kostya Mitenev's *UNDINA* and U.S.-based artist Victoria Vesna's *Bodies*© INCorporated, the body in cyberspace can become an appendage or assemblage of "cultural and racial fusion and fragmentation." Her critique of graphical virtual representa-

tions, or avatars, focuses on how options regarding racial representation elide the history of race and posit a notion of cybercitizenship that is purportedly universal as well as all-consuming.

González's essay is a component in a larger conversation regarding the various ways race is deployed in cyberspace. In cyberspace, users' bodies may be invisible, but, as in all representational media, issues of marking, racial and otherwise, are unavoidably part of its signifying practices. As mentioned earlier, users bring their assumptions and discursive patterns regarding race with them when they log on, and when the medium is interactive, they receive such assumptions and patterns as well. Lisa Nakamura's essay analyzes the ways in which advertisements for Compaq, IBM, MCI, and other high-tech corporations depict a "global village" in which racial and ethnic otherness are commodified, fixed, and pictured as antique and anachronistic. These examples of popular media narratives of commercial cyberspace demonstrate how orientalist and other racial stereotypes are reflected and generated in the discourse of marketing that surrounds the Internet.

As the existence of African American, Asian American, Latino, and other ethnic and racially oriented newsgroups and websites exhibits, cyberspace can be a place where ethnic and racial identity are examined, worked through, and reinforced. Cyberspace can provide a powerful coalition building and progressive medium for "minorities" separated from each other by distance and other factors. On the other hand, these nodes of race in cyberspace are marked as being parts of the whole, islands of otherness in a largely white, male, and middle-class cyberspace. Jonathan Sterne's essay traces the historical origins of current racial inequities online by examining the effects of technological public policy (in particular, the Technology Act of 1982) on educational infrastructure and funding in computer classrooms. As Sterne argues, the Internet is unlikely to live up to its hype as a democratizing and utopian force until the economic and cultural problems of access are addressed.

David Silver's essay on the Blacksburg, Virginia Electronic Village also focuses on racial inequalities in usage and access, by identifying the ways that community bulletin boards and websites "route around" race. His study shows how decisions regarding interface design can limit the levels of participation and representation available to differently gendered, nonheterosexual, or non-white users.

In addition to the impact of policy decisions regarding technology upon the racial composition of the Internet, the representations of cyberspace in popular media highlight an array of ideological attitudes toward race. Almost

a narrative unto themselves, these patterns of representation tell a story in tandem with the surface plot elements of contemporary films. The essays by Rajani Sudan and David Crane perform close readings of films about high technology, cyberspace, and race. Sudan's essay presents a reading of the film *Rising Sun* and its narrative use of computer-generated imaging techniques. She demonstrates that its depictions of image-enhancement technology are far from racially neutral, as the film's xenophobic paranoia about postindustrial competition between the United States and Japan plays itself out in the theater of cyberspatial racial representation. Crane presents a nuanced analysis of the ways that *Strange Days*, *Hackers*, *Virtuosity*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, and *Jumpin' Jack Flash* depict black characters as mediators between the "real" and the virtual. Crane posits that in these films, blackness is identified with the "street," with lived, as opposed to virtual, experience. The visual and narrative depictions of blackness as somehow authentic, stable, and "real" offset the fluidity and fragmentariness of cyberspace.

Like films, video games can offer representations of race, but only video games offer the user an interactive environment in which one can role-play as a member of a different race. Jeffrey A. Ow's essay describes the racial politics and modes of representation that are enacted in the everyday practice of contemporary video games. In particular, Ow analyzes the game *Shadow Warrior* and argues that the game forces the player to occupy a racist, violent, and colonialist subject position.

As the Internet permeates academia, commerce, politics, and other popular media such as film, fiction, advertising, and video games, it becomes increasingly crucial that rigorous inquiry from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints be brought to bear on the intersections between race and cyberspace. Cyberspace does indeed engender new combinations of ethnicity and racial-ity, and the essays in this volume describe and engage with these new constructions of race and cyberspace.

Cyberspace and race are both constructed cultural phenomena, not products of "nature"; they are made up of ongoing processes of definition, performance, enactment, and identity creation. Just as cyberspace is not a place (as Gertrude Stein might say, there is no there there), but rather a locus around which coalesce a hypertext of texts, modes of social interaction, commercial interests, and other discursive and imaging practices, so too race needs to be understood as a category created through social discourse and performance. Postcolonial theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah term race an "illusion," which makes it similar to Gibson's definition of cyberspace as a "consensual hal-

lucination"; both are phantasmatic effects of culture, rather than simple and stable facts of biology (in the case of race) or technology (in the case of cyberspace). Beth E. Kolko's essay considers how race is manifested in virtual worlds, and she examines how race, as an element of online identity, came to be eliminated from interactive cyberspaces. While her analysis of virtual world interfaces demonstrates the political power of technology design, her chapter also serves to introduce MOOScape, a virtual world she created to explicitly mark race in an attempt to consider how social interactions might be affected by such an environment.

The status of both race and cyberspace as virtual objects demands that we examine the specific ways and instances in which they inflect and project each other in the realm of cultural representation. Does race "disappear" in cyberspace? How is race visually represented in popular film and advertisements about cyberspace? Do narratives that depict racial and ethnic minorities in cyberspace simply recapitulate the old racist stereotypes, do they challenge them, do they use the medium to sketch out new virtual realities of race?

We have no illusions that this collection addresses all of these and other important questions pertaining to race and cyberspace. For example, important work remains to be done on the racial demographics of the cyber-workforce (from software coders to website designers, from e-commerce start-ups to "traditional" systems administration jobs) and their impact on the ways that race and race-related issues manifest themselves (or don't) online. Similarly, the field would benefit from additional work on patterns of distribution of computer technology and networks across the globe, and how the inequities in those patterns serve to keep the Internet a predominantly white environment.⁶ Moreover, even for the questions this volume does address, we make no claims to having exhausted all possible answers: there is much more that remains to be said about access, online (re)presentations of racial identity, and racialized representations of cyberspace. While the essays collected here cover a broad range of important questions about race and cyberspace, we're aware that this volume only begins to scratch the surface of possible work in this area.

What we hope for this collection, then, is that it helps to put questions of race more squarely on the table when it comes to the study of cyberspace—and that it does so in such a way as to help us move beyond the too-restrictive binary choice of keeping silent or engaging in flame wars. Our goal here is not to claim that we have all the answers and thus shut down the discussion; rather, we'd like to see this collection as a modest attempt to open a space where a larger, more extended, and more inclusive conversation about race and cyberspace can take place.

Notes

1. To provide a bit more context here, this particular observation came in response to a post in an ongoing thread about sexual orientation, in which a list member had drawn a distinction between race and sexual orientation on the grounds that the former is a simple matter of biological fact, while the latter involves a more complicated blending of genetics with social and cultural factors.
2. Norma Coates (1997) provides a compelling analysis of the way a similar flame war worked to discourage discussions of gender politics on ROCKLIST (a list formally dedicated to the "academic discussion of popular music").
3. To be fair, the utopian rhetoric of "colorblindness" isn't one exclusively invoked by white people (cf. the prominent role played by African Americans in eliminating affirmative action programs in California), but people of color are far less likely than whites (at least in the United States) to see racial issues as arising irregularly and unexpectedly—and thus as something that might satisfactorily be "solved" with the simple wish that we pretend that race doesn't matter.
4. For writings about cyberspace that discuss subjectivity, see articles in the collections *Cyberspace: First Steps*, edited by Michael Benedikt; *Cultures of Internet*, edited by Rob Shields; *Wired Women*, edited by Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise; *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows; *Cybersociety* and *Cybersociety 2.0*, edited by Steve Jones; *Internet Culture*, edited by David Porter. Relevant single-authored books include *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, by Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The Second Self and Life on the Screen*, by Sherry Turkle, and *The Second Media Age*, by Mark Poster.
5. For exceptions to this, see Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak "Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use"; Cameron Bailey, "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace"; and Lisa Nakamura, "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet."
6. There is some work in this area (eg. the work of William Wresch), but there remains much more to be done.

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