CYBERTYPES

Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a place where race happens. In the early days of the Net, technological visionaries imagined the online world as a utopian space where everything—even transcending racism—was possible. But now the Internet "revolution" is over, a fact upon which nearly everyone, from hackers to academics to dot-com investors, agrees. This book looks at what happened to race when it went online, and how our ideas about race, ethnicity, and identity continue to be shaped and reshaped every time we log on, even if we've just entered the post-Internet "epoch."[1]

After years of idealistic technohype, David Brooks wrote, in the *New York Times Magazine*,

> It's goodbye to the epoch—which must have lasted all of seven years—in which people chatted excitedly about free-agent nations, distance being dead, I.P.O.'s, the long boom and those dot-com ads during the Super Bowl that showed global children united by the wonders of instant communication. One minute you've got zip-drive techies pulling all-nighters amid their look-at-me-I'm-wacky workstations, and the next moment—poof—it seems so stale. Suddenly, it doesn't really matter much if the speed of microprocessors doubles with the square root of every lunar eclipse (or whatever Moore's law was). And so just like a used-bong sale in 1978 or a yellow-tie auction in 1990, scenes like this [. . .] bring a psychological decade to a sobering close. What started out as the biggest revolution since Gutenberg ends up as a giant yard sale [. . .]. What's gone is the sense that the people who are using the stuff are on the cutting edge of history and everyone else is roadkill. (28)

I started the research that led to this book in 1995, a year after Brooks dates the beginning of the Internet epoch, and completed it in 2001, the year he and most pundits agree brought the end of the Internet's heyday. At three years shy of a decade, it's a short-lived epoch indeed. Perhaps it succumbed to "Internet time," that com-

pression of time to which we've grown accustomed in our high-tech lives.[2]

In these post-Internet times, it may be true that possessing access to the Internet no longer guarantees one a place at the "cutting edge of history." However, *lack of access* to the Internet—often found along raced, classed, and still, to a narrowing extent, gendered lines—continues to cut particular bodies *out* of various histories in the making. The epochal terms used by Brooks to describe the end of the "new economy" are characteristic of much popular intellectual writing on the Internet: those people who were run over, routed around, or simply denied access to the Internet are characterized as "roadkill" on the information superhighway.[3] This online roadkill is, quite simply, the poor and people of color.

Though Brooks writes that in 2001 there is no longer the sense that Internet nonusers are roadkill (a debatable claim indeed, considering recent concern over the "digital divide" that separates technology haves from have-nots), he does acknowledge that it was once thought so during those crucial years in which the discursive landscape of the Internet was being formed. Hence, people of color were functionally absent from the Internet at precisely that time when its discourse was acquiring its distinctive contours.

The repercussions of the discursive gap are immense, for, as I stated earlier, the Internet is a place where race happens; even in the absence of users of color, images of race and racialism proliferate in cyberspace. The ideological uses to which race is put in this medium must be examined before we can even begin to consider cyberspace's promise as a democratic and progressive medium. Daniel Punday is one of many cyberculture scholars who pose the question, Can the Internet propagate genuinely new and nonracist (and nonsexist and nonclassist) ways of being, or does it merely reflect our culture at large? Punday identifies two phases of Internet scholarship, the first and most utopian of which asserts that the former is true while the second asserts the latter. He writes that "quite contrary to the early belief that cyberspace offers a way to escape gender, race, and class as conditions of social interaction [. . .] recent critics suggest that online discourse is woven of stereotypical cultural narratives that reinstall precisely those conditions" (199).[4] In this passage, he claims that this second phase of scholarship has be-

come the dominant one: "these critics are debating whether participants in online discourse are constructing coherent identities that shed light on the real world or whether they are merely tacking together an identity from media sources. As critics have gradually begun to accept the latter, they have lost confidence in the socially transformative possibilities of online discourse" (204).

There is no doubt that the Internet is a "socially transformative" force; what seems to be at issue here is rather the specific nature of that ongoing transformation as well as its particular object. Rather than adopting a utopian or pessimistic view in which the Internet is viewed as either a vector for progressive change in the classical liberal tradition or as the purveyor of crude and simplistic "stereotypical cultural narratives," it seems crucial to first narrow the focus a bit and examine the specific means by which identities are deployed in cyberspace. Currently, "popular attitudes toward the Internet tend to be maddeningly bipolar—either the Net changes *everything* or the Net changes nothing" (Heilemann 138). Of course, the truth lies between these two poles: the Net changes *some* things. Images of race on the Net are both "stereotyped" at times, as in some chat rooms, cyberpunk fictions, and advertisements, and at other times, race is deployed in creative coalition building that creates a sense of *community* and racial identity online. As scholars become more sensitized to issues of diversity online,[5] there is a welcome shift in emphasis from simply recognizing that racial inequity does exist there to a growing concern with how race is represented in cyberspace, for the Internet is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where "race" is created as an effect of the net's distinctive uses of language. Hence, it is crucial to examine not only the wide variety of rhetorical conditions of utterance, reception, audience, and user/speaker that create particular communicative situations in cyberspace, but also to trace the ways in which this array of situations creates "cybertypes," or images of racial identity engendered by this new medium. Only then will it be possible to assess the Net's potential for "social transformation."

What ideological and cultural work does race do in cyberspace? The question demands a number of different types of critical approaches and examples, since cyberspace makes so many different kinds of narrative possible: user-to-user narratives (such as those

produced in chat rooms or e-mail) and user-to-interface narratives (that is to say, what happens when users encounter design issues and interact with them) constitute just two examples. There is also a formidable array of narratives about cyberspace, such as cyberpunk fictions and popular advertisements for the Internet, that inform the ways that users envision and interact with its racial terrain. Each chapter of this book addresses the question of racial cybertyping's operations (for better or worse) in the different rhetorical spaces of and around the Internet in an attempt to acknowledge their variety and particularity, for it makes no more sense to discuss the Net as one "thing" than it does to discuss literature without reference to period, genre, style, or audience.

Chapter 1, "Cybertyping and the Work of Race in the Age of Digital Reproduction," examines the ways that race gets coded for different kinds of work in the information economy, and traces the ways that cybertyping proliferates as part of a cultural matrix that surrounds the Internet. While foreign workers are often glorified as exemplary information workers (as in the case of immigrant Asian engineers with H1B visas), American racial minorities, in particular African Americans, are troped quite differently, as outsiders to digital economies and systems of representation. This permits a kind of cosmetic cosmopolitanism that perpetuates a digital divide that splits along the axis of racial representations as well as along patterns of computer access organized around racial difference. Racism in this country is ignored in favor of celebrating the diversity of "foreign" information workers, who are represented in advertisements as a Benetton-like rainbow of racial difference—decorative, exotic, and comfortably distant.

Chapter 2, entitled "Head-Hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphical Chat Spaces," focuses on user-to-user interactions in social role-playing spaces online. While these spaces could be categorized as "games," the MUDs, MOOs, and chat rooms that I examine,[6] specifically LambdaMOO and Club Connect, are also theatrical and discursive spaces where identity is performed, swapped, bought, and sold in both textual and graphic media. When users create characters to deploy in these spaces, they are electing to perform versions of themselves as raced and gendered beings. When users' charac-

ters, or "avatars," are differently raced from the user, the opportunity for online recreational passing or "identity tourism" arises; that is to say, users perform stereotyped versions of the "Oriental" that perpetuate old mythologies about racial difference. And as Caren Kaplan points out in *Questions of Travel*, tourists operate from a position of privilege and entitlement (62); to be a tourist is to possess mobility, access, and the capital to satisfy curiosities about "native" life. Chat-space participants who take on identities as samurai and geisha constitute the darker side of postmodern identity, since the "fluid selves" they create (and often so lauded by postmodern theorists) are done so in the most regressive and stereotyped of ways. These kinds of racial identity plays stand as a critique of the notion of the digital citizen as an ideal cogito whose subjectivity is liberated by cyberspace. On the contrary, only too often does one person's "liberation" constitute another's recontainment within the realm of racialized discourse. The socially marginalized have a different relation to postmodernity than do members of majority cultures or races. Hence, they have a different relation to cyberspace, or to put it another way, they "do" virtuality differently. That is to say, the type of fragmentation of self or subjectivity they experience online (and as decentered subjects in postmodern culture) differs from that of "majority" users. Though Phillip Brian Harper doesn't look at the Internet specifically in *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*, he does cite technology as one of the forces engendering the fragmentation characteristic of life in postmodern times, and asserts that "what 'minority' subjects often experience as their primary source of disorientation—the social effects of their difference in contexts where it is construed as negative—will complicate their experience of what has heretofore been conceived as the 'general' disorientation characteristic of the postmodern condition" (29). In other words, being raced is in itself a disorienting position. Being raced in cyberspace is doubly disorienting, creating multiple layers of identity construction. While on the one hand people of color have always been postmodern (and by extension "virtual"), if postmodernism is defined as that way of seeing subjectivity as decentered, fragmented, and marginalized, on the other hand their lack of access to technology and popular figuration as the "primitive" both on- and offline (those virtual samurai and

geisha are certainly not to be found in "modern," let alone postmodern, Japan) positions them simultaneously in the nostalgic world of the premodern. The Internet is certainly a place where social differences such as race are frequently construed as negative. While everyone in cyberspace is disoriented, people of color in cyberspace come to the medium already in this state, already marginalized, fragmented, and imbricated within systems of signification that frame them in multiple and often contradictory ways. The celebration of the "fluid self" that simultaneously lauds postmodernity as a potentially liberatory sort of worldview tends to overlook the more disturbing aspects of the fluid, marginalized selves that already exist offline in the form of actual marginalized peoples, which is not nearly so romantic a formulation. But then, this is symptomatic of both postmodern theory and cyberculture studies, neither of which wants to look at race critically. As Harper claims, "the experiences of socially marginalized groups implicitly inform the 'general' postmodern condition without being accounted for in theorizations of it" (4). Indeed, if we are all marginalized and decentered, or if we are all equally "virtual" when we are in cyberspace, what need is there to refer to race at all in discussions of identity online or in a postmodern world?

But, of course, we are not all equally on the margins in the world offline, just as we are not all equally "virtual" in relation to the Internet. And as our culture's investment in computer gaming such as chat rooms and interactive social spaces only continues to grow, it becomes all the more important that we focus a critical gaze on the ways that race is played in these theaters of identity.

While chapter 2 identifies cybertyped versions of race enacted by users in both graphical and textual chat spaces, chapter 3, entitled "Race in the Construct and the Construction of Race: The 'Consensual Hallucination' of Multiculturalism in the Fictions of Cyberspace," examines the source of these "types" in popular narratives about cyberspace. The study of racial impersonation and passing on MOOs and MUDs reveals a great deal about how people "do" race online; this chapter locates the origin of some of these master narratives about how race is done online in 1980s and '90s cyberpunk narratives. Close readings of four influential cyberpunk texts—two from the 1980s (Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* and

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William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*) and two from the 1990s, (Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* and Andy and Larry Wachowski's film *The Matrix*)—reveal the ways that cyberspace is racialized in popular narratives, and identify a progression from relatively simple and traditional forms of techno-orientalism to a more nuanced vision of racial hybridity which nonetheless performs its own variety of cybertyping.

Chapter 4, "'Where Do You Want to Go Today?': Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality," picks up where chapter 3 leaves off by extending the range of inquiry to television and print advertisements produced by large telephony and networking companies like IBM, Compaq, MCI, and Microsoft. These advertisements, which appeared in mainstream and academic publications, are symptomatic of the ways that corporate discourse cybertypes use race as a visual commodity for the user. Images of exotic travel in the "third world," and "primitive" places and people, are part of a persistent pattern of signification that reinforces the notion of the Western computer and network user as a tourist in cyberspace. Earlier colonial discourses that privilege the Western gaze and the sense of freedom, expansiveness, and mastery engendered by its deployment are directly referenced in the quasi-anthropological visual language of these ads, which often evoke images from *National Geographic* magazines of days gone by.

Chapter 5, "Menu-Driven Identities: Making Race Happen Online," examines the relationship between the user and the interface, in particular those interfaces on the Internet such as website portals and e-mail programs, which most users encounter on a daily basis, and traces the ways that interface design can produce cybertyped versions of race. When interfaces present us with menus that insist on a limited range of choices vis-à-vis race, this discursive narrowing of the field of representation can work to deny the existence of ways of being raced that don't fit into neatly categorizable boxes. Registration pages on websites that demand that users click a box describing them as "Asian," "African American," or "Hispanic" create a textual environment in which mixtures of or variations on these already contested categories are literally impossible to express using this interface. This kind of menu-driven racial identity not only denies the possibility of a mestiza consciousness at a time

when our social realities are bending to acknowledge the existence of various forms of racial and cultural hybridity, but also serves a racist ideology which benefits from retaining solid and simplistic notions of race. I juxtapose this reading of corporate interfaces that cybertype users in limiting and simplistic ways to another example, that of ethnic identity e-mail jokes that circulate between groups of users who can share a more fluid, less essentialized sense of racial identity. As John Heilemann notes,

> Andy Grove, C.E.O. of Intel, asserted in a 2001 interview with *Wired* that Internet penetration in the U.S. is substantially ahead of the rest of the world. In the next five years, one thing that is likely to happen is that Internet penetration in the rest of the world is going to replicate what's happened here. And that is going to let—Seattle-style protests notwithstanding—a globalization of culture, of business, of communications achieve a level of pervasiveness that in itself will change the world significantly. (139)

Grove is speaking from the point of view of a person who's been involved in the Internet's infrastructure and commerce from the beginning, not as a scholar of critical theory, ethnic studies, or progressive politics. And in that sense he is typical of most of the captains of the Internet industry machine: his view is that "globalization of culture, of business, of communications" is an unambiguously good thing. Phallic metaphors of the Internet as a peculiarly "penetrative" medium sound patriarchal, as indeed they are. But more to the point, they figure globalization as the result of that penetration, a penetration that cannot be resisted, despite "Seattle-style protests." Clearly, there is a great deal at stake here. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois writes that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (v). At the end of the Internet epoch and the advent of the twenty-first century, this is *still* the problem that haunts cyberspace. It is crucial that scholarly inquiry examine the ways that racism is perpetuated by both globalization and communications technologies like the Internet across a range of discursive fields and cultural matrices. This becomes all the more important as locales outside of the United

States submit to "penetration" by the medium, and consequently undergo the sometimes-wrenching transformations that accompany such discursive shifts. This book examines the ways that race is configured in English-language based cyberspaces hosted in the United States. However, in the face of Grove's vision of Internet-driven globalization (which there is no reason in my mind to doubt) it is clear that more research needs to be done on the emerging terrain of race, ethnicity, and racism in non-American cyberspaces. America is not the only place where "digital divides" separate the "roadkill" from the digerati.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / vii

INTRODUCTION / xi

< 1 >

Cybertyping and the Work of Race
in the Age of Digital Reproduction / 1

< 2 >

Head-Hunting on the Internet:
Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing
in Textual and Graphic Chat Spaces / 31

< 3 >

Race in the Construct and the Construction of Race:
The "Consensual Hallucination" of Multiculturalism
in the Fictions of Cyberspace / 61

< 4 >

"Where Do You Want to Go Today?":
Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet,
and Transnationality / 87

< 5 >

Menu-Driven Identities:
Making Race Happen Online / 101

CONCLUSION

Keeping It (Virtually) Real:
The Discourse of Cyberspace
as an Object of Knowledge / 137

NOTES / 147

WORKS CITED / 159

INDEX / 167

< 1 >

CYBERTYPING AND THE WORK OF RACE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

Software engineers and academics have something in common: they both like to make up new words. And despite the popular press's glee in mocking both computer-geek and academic jargon, there are several good arguments to be made for the creation of useful neologisms, especially in cases where one of these fields of study is brought to bear on the other. The Internet has spawned a whole new set of vocabulary and specialized terminology because it is a new tool for communicating that has enabled a genuinely new discursive field, a way of generating and consuming language and signs that is distinctively different from other, older media. It is an example of what is dubbed "the new media" (a term refreshingly different from the all-purpose *post-* prefix so familiar to critical theorists, but destined to date just as badly). Terms such as *cybersex*, *online*, *file compression*, *hypertext link*, and *downloading* are now part of the Internet user's everyday vocabulary since they describe practices or virtual objects that lack analogues in either offline life or other media. The new modes of discourse enabled by the Internet require new descriptive terminologies and conceptual frameworks.

Just as engineers and programmers routinely come up with neologisms to describe new technologies, so too do academics and cultural theorists coin new phrases and terms to describe concepts they wish to introduce to the critical conversation. While these attempts are not always well advised, and certainly do contribute at times to the impenetrable and unnecessarily confusing nature of high theory's rhetoric, there are some compelling reasons that this move seems peculiarly appropriate in the case of academic studies of the

Internet. Lev Manovich and Espen Aarseth both make a persuasive case for the creation and deployment of a distinctively new set of terminologies to describe the new media, in particular the Internet. In *The Language of New Media* Manovich asserts that "comparing new media to print, photography, or television will never tell us the whole story" and that "to understand the logic of new media we need to turn to computer science. It is there that we may expect to find the new terms, categories, and operations which characterize media which became programmable. From media studies, we move to something which can be called software studies; from media theory—to software theory" (65). This statement calls for a radical shift in focus from traditional ways of envisioning media to a new method that takes the indispensability of the computer-machine into account. It truly does call for a reconceptualization of media studies, and constitutes a call for new terms more appropriate to "software studies" to best convey the distinctive features of new media, in particular the use of the computer.

Manovich identifies two "layers" to new media: the cultural layer, which is roughly analogous to "content," and the computer layer, or infrastructure, interface, or other machine-based forms that structure the computer environment. His argument that the computer layer can be expected to have a "significant influence on the cultural logic of media" (63) is in some sense not original; the notion that form influences content (and vice versa) has been around since the early days of literary criticism. It has been conceded for some time now that certain forms allow or disallow the articulation of certain ideas. However, what is original about this argument is its claim that our culture is becoming "computerized" in a wholesale and presumably irrevocable fashion. This is a distinctively different proposition from asserting the importance of, say, electronic *literacy*, a paradigm that is still anchored by its terminology in the world of a very old medium: writing. Manovich calls for a new terminology, native to the computer: he goes on to write that

> in new media lingo, to "transcode" something is to translate it into another format. The computerization of culture gradually accomplishes similar transcoding in relation to all cul-

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