

VIRTUAL SKIN: ARTICULATING RACE IN CYBERSPACE

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Is “race” corporeal? Is that all there is to one of the most complex and contested discourses of the modern era — skin, eyes, lips and hair? Clearly not. Most theories of race reject a biological basis altogether in favour of a tangle of social, political and psychic forces that work their strange and funky work on each one of us every day. That's how it goes in the real world.

But what about cyberspace — and here I'm concentrating on online communication: the Internet, commercial online services, bulletin board systems. Do the same laws apply? Recent writing on electronic communication systems insist that despite its disembodied nature, cyberspace remains what Michael Benedikt calls a familiar social construct ‘with the ballast of materiality cast away’ (4). That means race may function in much the same way that it does in the world where we are more directly accountable to our bodies. It may mean that, but it's hard to tell, because very few of the thinkers currently probing into cyberspace have said a word about race.

Faced with the delirious prospect of leaving our bodies behind for the cool swoon of digital communication, the leading theorists of cyberspace have addressed the philosophical implications of a new technology by retreating to old ground. In a landscape of contemporary cultural criticism in which the discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality have often led to the next leap in understanding — where, in fact, they have been so thoroughly used as to turn sometimes into mantra — these interpretive tools have come curiously late to the debate around cyberspace. It may be that the prevailing discussion of digitally assisted subjectivity has focused not on the culture of cyberspace as it exists today, but on the potential of cyberspace, on utopian or dystopic visions for tomorrow. Since we never reveal ourselves so much as when we dream, it's worth noting that most speculations on the future of cyberspace return questions of race to the margins. Volumes such as Michael Benedikt's *Cyberspace: First Steps* and Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* barely mention the subject at all; only writers like Donna Haraway and Vivian Sobchack have taken the question of cybernetic identity beyond a direct relationship between technology and a unified, representative, obvious human subjectivity.

But does race matter? Can it sustain itself in the shifting space of virtual communities? It would seem clear that the safety of binary oppositions — self/other, black/white, male/female, straight/gay, writer/reader — would evaporate in the forcefully

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uncertain world of electronic discourse. A message comes and goes without a face, communication takes place without bodies to ground it, to provide the deeper layers of meaning below the surface upon which we all depend. This is especially important given the extent to which social interaction depends on embodied communication, on stable, known genders, sexualities, races and classes being somewhere present in the communicative act. Without this there would be no power flowing through communication, and without the flow of power, what would we have to say to one another?

Cyberspace communication challenges all that. In the online world, identity is often chosen, played with, subverted, or foregrounded as a construct. There appears to be in this a demonstration of the freedom provided by disembodied communication, the ludic element that is central to cyberspace activity in general, as well as the influence of 25 years of postmodernity. What makes cyberspace so interesting as a public sphere is how none of the usual landmarks can be trusted. Also, the old economy of readers and writers, speakers and listeners is turned sideways; with the simultaneity and multidirectionality of online communication, authority is won and lost with such frequency that it becomes nearly irrelevant.

But online interaction is anything but a utopia of democratic communication. Feminist critics have pointed out how cyberspace is gendered to reproduce boring phallographic limits on expression. Many have noted that the ideal of unfettered democracy touted by so many champions of the Internet contains its own ideological dead weight. Like the democracy of the ancient Greeks, today's digital democracy is reserved for an elite with the means to enjoy it. So it is with race. Existing racial discourses find their way into cyberspace, not simply as content, but as part of the shaping structure of the place. As with any other arena where identities are produced and exchanged, this aspect of cyberspace rests on the question of representation.

I want to look at issues of representation at both the social and personal level, to distinguish between what Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien call representation as delegation and representation as depiction. In social terms, it's necessary to examine how variant communities are constructed online, as well as the access that different communities have to communication technology. In the United States, for instance, there is a growing movement among African Americans to resist being excluded by those corporations getting ready to wire the suburbs for the forthcoming ideology — aka information — superhighway. While this is primarily a consumer issue that only grazes deeper questions of engagement with the apparatus, there comes with this mobilization a push for greater technological literacy among blacks and other disenfranchised people.

In personal terms, we need to explore what it means to construct identity without the aid of racial and cultural markers

like physical appearance, accent, and so on. Here, I will be dealing exclusively with those forms of electronic communication that depend on text instead of any figurative representation of the physical body — i.e. Internet newsgroups, online forums, e-mail, and text-based environments like Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). On the surface it would seem that these are literary domains similar to an exchange of correspondence or the letters page of a newspaper. One presents oneself in language as is done in all forms of writing, which requires all the acts of identity construction, selective editing and lies committed by anybody who has ever written anything. But online communication adds something more — speed and uncertainty. MUDs operate in close-to-real time, providing an instantaneity that remains disembodied like writing but is nonetheless immediate like the telephone. And the literary contract between writer and readers becomes blurred. In the world of Internet newsgroups, mailing lists and electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs), writers post messages simultaneously to individuals and to groups sharing a similar interest. The question of address becomes more complex. Also, the way in which these messages are retrieved and read gives the reader a power akin to the hiphop sampler's authority over source music — it's a consumer's market. All of this uproots the online writers sense of his or her centred self. If identity is created solely through text and the text is as fluid as this, things fall apart in interesting ways.

My own first experience of virtual community came in Rock Dundo, Barbados, 1969, when I first jacked in to a smooth, plastic, khaki-coloured View Master™. My mother, thousands of kilometers away in Canada, sent me both the machine and its software — disks that brought to life before my eyes images I had never seen before: Niagara Falls and Flowerpot Island and Toronto City Hall in stereoscopic vision. It would be two decades before I tried on a VR helmet, but I knew the thrill of virtual reality right then. I was transported. Every time I returned to that machine I left the postcolonial sunshine behind for the marvels of Canada. Immersed in the depth, resolution and brightness of those images I became a part of Canada, sharing an experience with every tourist who had paused to get a good look at new City Hall, who had marveled at the Falls. More importantly, by entering these images, I could share the desire for the spectacle of Canada with my mother, who had recently immigrated there. What's interesting is that this period, from the late 60s to the late 70s, saw both the rapid disintegration of first-world national-ethnic boundaries, as more and more immigrants arrived in western metropolises from Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America, and the beginnings of the Internet and other online networks.

Now, as I produce these words on a newer piece of fetish hardware — a matte-black IBM ThinkPad™ — I can extend into corners of cyberspace, remaking myself by will and accident, reading and misreading others. It's exhilarating at first, but it's not new. As Stuart Hall and others have pointed out, migration is central a part of the postcolonial experience, and it

necessarily involves shifting identity. It's the nature of Asian and African new-worlders to pass through different allegiances, belief systems and accents — for me it was Wembley, Rock Dundo and now Toronto — as a common part of life. At the same time, one develops a hyper-awareness of the relationship between physicality and identity. Like women, like lesbians and gays, people of colour living in Western metropolises live a crucial part of their existence as body-people, as subjects named and identified through their flesh. One need only hear “Monkey!” or “Water-buffalo!” screamed at you on the street every once in a while to be reminded of that.

Much of this begins with Rene Descartes, who has caught unimagined hell from countless thinkers for dividing the self into mind and body functions so cleanly. Cyber-theorists return to his work not only for its mapping of space, but also for its notion of the split subject, consciousness split from flesh. In selected bits, Descartes does indeed appear binary. However, in the process of his argument one finds a struggle to name the differences between mind and body, a struggle that belies his more definitive conclusions. What remains important is that indeterminacy. Consciousness meets corporeality in countless guises; sometimes they swap clothes.

What's come to be called Cartesian space, however, is much more fixed. As Sally Pryor and Jill Scott note, the cybersubject within Cartesian space remains distinct and apart from his or her virtual environment, because Cartesian space requires a vantage point outside of the spatial field, and gives a primacy to looking at and moving forward. This is the principle of the most popular video games, and it is a way of being in the world to which boys respond with a particular glee.

The cybersubject as defined by most current theorizing is not only gendered, but also has a clear cultural specificity that derives from a calcification of the questions that run through Cartesian thought. Steven Whittaker defines the typical cyberspace enthusiast as someone who desires embodiment and disembodiment in the same instant. His ideal machine would address itself to his senses, yet free him from his body. His is a vision which loves sensorial possibility while hating bodily limits. He loves his senses and hates his body! (45)

It sounds as lurid as *I Was A Teenage Cyborg*, though not so innocent. Pryor and Scott remind us of the link between this mind-body split and related oppositions like self-other, subject-object and male-female; they also insist on remembering the power that inheres in these oppositions — one side desirable, the other a threat.

So, taking the preferred side of the handful of primary couplets of identification, the cybersubject as currently figured is male, white, straight, able-bodied and ruling class. So what? Any identity that occupies the shadow half of these categories (i.e. female, black, queer...) remains lashed to his or her body.

Whole libraries of feminist thought tell us that a woman's identity has historically been defined and maintained through the body. The same holds true for Africans in the West, Aboriginal people, and so on. Biology is destiny. Physiology is law. Subjecthood lies over the horizon. This becomes especially interesting in a domain which privileges giving up the body so eagerly. That process is neither universally simple or universally desirable.

It's important to distinguish here between the cybersubject as a figure produced by current thought about cyberspace, and the actual people who enter cyberspace every day. In the same way that film theory distinguishes between the cinematic spectator as a function of the cinematic text, and so-called “real-world” viewers of movies, we must note that the cybersubject defined above is produced by still limited notions of the experience of cyberspace, and has a relationship to, but is in no way co-extensive with, the millions who communicate online or enter virtual reality. Cyberspace is built for that unified subject, but inhabited by a happily chaotic range of subjectivities.

Freeing up movement, communication and sensation from the limitations of the flesh might be the promise of digital experience, but the body will not be abandoned so easily. We have said that the quality of imagination is what allows all manner of disembodied experience, from being “immersed” in narrative to the spatial metaphors of cyberspace. Returning to Descartes, his notion of imagination appears suddenly pertinent: an “application of the cognitive faculty to a body intimately present to it — a body, therefore, that exists” (109). An awareness of the physical, “real” body is crucial to the disembodied projections of cyberspace. The physical body remains as a referent. Cyberspace wouldn't make sense without it. Here lies the connection between race and cyberspace. Western racial discourse began in a scientific attempt to account for physical differences among people. Even when its meaning had left any pretense at science behind and extended into social and political spheres, the fact of the body remained. Skin, eyes, lips and hair endured as a powerful referent, ready to be drawn upon as evidence. At its most abstract, racial discourse still involves an imaginative act that relies on the physical body. Habeas corpus, or there's nothing to discuss.

I want to turn now to the notion of a cyberspace community. There's a Bantu proverb that's relevant, which says, quite plainly, that a human being is a person through (other) people.”

With its mail, discussion groups, bulletin boards and shareware, with its geography and its idiom, cyberspace simulates community, a community more dependent on imagination than most. In Benedict Anderson's schema, a nation coheres around three principles: to be limited, to be sovereign, and to be a community. “Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each,” he says, “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”.

So what is the nature of the online community? First, the economics of online communication require that participants have access to a computer, a modem and a telephone line. Cancel tens of millions of North Americans. Until recently, Internet access required membership in an elite institution — a university, government department or major corporation. Millions more gone, but not evenly across the board. In the United States, African Americans and Hispanics are over represented among those without Net access, as are Aboriginal people in Canada. Owning the means of participation is a class issue, and another example of how class is racialized in North America.

Beyond economics, there is a somewhat harder to quantify culture of cyberspace. The Net nation deploys shared knowledge and language to unite against outsiders: Net jargon extends beyond technical language to acronyms both benign (BTW for “By the way”) and snippy (RTFM for “Read the fucking manual”). It includes neologisms, the text-graphical hybrids called emoticons, and a thoroughgoing anti-“newbie” snobbery. Like any other community, it uses language to erect barriers to membership. It’s worth noting that Anderson suggests print culture is crucial to the formation of nations. The Internet is nothing if not a riot of publishing, often about and on top of itself. Popular guides like Brendan Kehoe’s *Zen and the Art of the Internet*, as well as the countless lists of Frequently Asked Questions serve to provide a body of common knowledge and therefore enforce order on the Net. There is in these codes of language, and in the very concept of “netiquette”, something of the culture of suburban America; one gets the sense that these structures are in place not simply to order cyberspace, but to keep chaos (the urban sphere) out. It’s no stretch to suggest that in the turn to cyberspace, the white middle-class men who first populated it sought refuge from the hostile forces in physical, urban space — crime, poor people, desperate neighborhoods, and black and brown folks. In writing about a BBS called New York Online, Noah Green compares the hermetic concerns of most BBSs to white flight from urban reality. New York Online, he says, promises “a virtual community that’s a complement to, not an escape from, an existing physical one.” Most of its membership — “50 per cent minority and 40 per cent female” — lives in Brooklyn. The norm, however, remains closer to Michael Heim’s vision of the alienated subject-under-siege, where “our communities grow more fragile, airy, and ephemeral, even as our connections multiply.”

So the suburban ideal of postwar North America returns in virtual form: communication at a safe distance, community without contact. Is it any wonder that when movies visualize the Net’s matrix of communication, it so often resembles the cool, aerial patterns of a suburb at night?

Following from Benedict Anderson, we can say that the online nation has constructed itself as a community that is not by stated principles racist, but, because of the way nations are always constructed, has built affinities (and by definition, ex-

clusions), that have the effect of shunting aside certain voices, languages and vernaculars. However, this historical condition is now in tremendous flux as the online world grows to become a collection of communities. Time magazine has shrieked that “now that the population of the Net is larger than that of most countries in the world... the Internet is becoming Balkanized” (43). I prefer to see the change as more in keeping with the established, decentralizing spirit of the Net. Now at a transitional stage before commerce stomps in, cyberspace is more open to the free play of subcultures than it ever was. Some examples:

- Soc.culture.african.american is one of the busiest of Usenet newsgroups, accumulating hundreds of posts every few hours.

- Dozens of other newsgroups are devoted to a variety of self-defined cultural communities. The speed, anonymity and diffusion of newsgroup debate mean that subjects usually confined to safe, private conversation among friends or family are given semi-public airing on Usenet. Genocide theories and interracial dating are perennials in soc.culture.african.american; everything from assimilation to eating dogs comes up in soc.culture.asian.american.” In addition to this kind of debate, Aboriginal activists use alt.native and soc.culture.native to get the word out on local struggles and call for support from the online community.

- African American cyberspace activist Art McGee compiles and distributes regular surveys of mailing lists, newsgroups and BBSs of interest to African Americans. The catalogue of mailing lists numbers more than 60, including lists devoted to the Association of Black Sociologist, Cameroonian students studying in London, and departed jazz guru Sun Ra. McGee’s signature line is: “The revolution will not be televised, but the proceedings will be available online.”

- NativeNet, an online network organized in part by Aboriginal artists working through the Banff Centre For the Arts, spans North America.

- The sale and exchange of digitized porn images caters increasingly to racial fetishes, with white and Asian women carrying the highest currency. The narratives of interracial desire remain popular on porn BBSs, and even on African American porn BBSs like *Ebony Shack*, images of black male-white female scenarios sometimes outnumber all other configurations.

- As Aboriginal people and people of colour organize online, so do far-right, white-power organizations. Alt.politics.nationalism.white rivals soc.culture.african.american in popularity — and both are riddled with ridiculous junk posts.

To sum up here, the discourse of race is, by history and by design, rooted in the body. Cybersubjectivity promises the fantasy of disembodied communication, and yet it remains firmly connected to bodies through the imaginative act required to project into cyberspace. What cybersubjectivity actually offers is re-embodied communication. So how should I re-embody myself amidst the Net’s possibilities for self-presentation?

Should I announce myself racially, give myself a secure racial identity? As an experiment, I conducted a poll in a mainstream cyberspace venue — CompuServe’s African American forum, asking how participants situated themselves online.

What was most interesting about the response was how quickly the thread moved away from the question of how one identifies oneself to a more manageable debate about racism. From what I’ve been able to glean in this and other online conversations, many African Americans (my survey was limited in sample) are unwilling to probe too deeply into what part racial identity plays in their conception of themselves, on what part of them stays black when they present no “evidence” of blackness. Race is either “taken for granted” or deliberately left unspoken. *It seems that the prevailing view among the people of colour who communicate regularly online is that racial anonymity, even if it’s a pretense, is a practical pretense.* Given that cyberspace is already a racialized domain, this sort of virtual transvestism is by no means neutral. In another era it used to be called passing.

There is another option. Taking a cue from the adolescent white boys who invented so much of cyberculture, I could play. I could also try to extend my engagement with cyberspace beyond the ludic economies of North American teenagers to include trickster traditions, signifying, and elements of spirituality that lie outside Western rationalism. That way subjectivity need not be a fixed racial assertion nor a calculated transvestism; it could be more fluid, more strategic.

Even better, I could go all the way back to that View MasterTM, holding it up to the bright Barbados sun so I could see Canada better. This might be some kind of an answer: maybe I can reach for the ecstasy of projected community and irresolvable difference, and claim them both in the very same moment.

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