
DIGITIZING RACE
Visual Cultures of the Internet
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Introduction

Digital Racial Formations and Networked Images of the Body

A constellation of events in relation to the Internet, digital visual representations of bodies, and racial identity came into alignment in the mid-nineties. First, 1995 was a turning point in the history of the Internet. In 1995 Netscape Navigator, the first widely popular graphical Web browser, had its first public stock offering and initiated popular use of the Internet and, most importantly, heralded its transformation from a primarily textual form to an increasingly and irreversibly graphical one that remediates video and other pictorially representational practices such as photography, cartooning, and digital gaming. That process has only accelerated in recent years as the Internet converges with nonstatic media forms such as streaming video and television. Much of the earlier research on the Internet discussed it as a vehicle for writing. This primarily textual Internet no longer dominates and in some cases no longer exists: many MOOs, MUDs, and Listservs have gone offline. Much of the research written in the nineties centered on hypertext theory, or on discursive "virtual communities" formed by shared interests that assumed subcultural status for their users. The days in which *Wired* magazine and *Mondo 2000* set the agenda for an elite and largely male digerati have passed; Internet use has definitively crossed the line between hobby or niche practice and has taken its place as part of everyday life. This new way of conceptualizing the Internet is reflected in scholarly titles such as *The Internet*

in Everyday Life, edited by Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, which figures this transition forthrightly. Titles such as Sherry Turkle's influential *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, published in 1995, imply not only that the nature of identity has shifted definitively because of the Internet but that that age is still upon us; at this point it is safe to say that we live in a *post*-Internet age. The years since 1995 have seen a shift toward the massification of the Internet as a media and communicative form—earlier questions about its importance in the cultural life of American citizens and its possible relevance as a subject for academic curricula and study have been put to rest in a surprisingly short amount of time. As Steven Shaviro claims: "The Internet and the World Wide Web are no longer places for pioneers to explore and stake their claims; they have been absorbed into the texture of our everyday life. If Barlow's exceptionalism with regard to cyberspace seems dated, this is simply because virtual reality is no longer an exception; today, it is everywhere and everything."[1]

These key years in the development of the Internet as a mainstream practice occurred during a pivotal moment in American politics. The Clinton-Gore administration in the United States heralded an ongoing process dubbed "nineties neoliberalism" by the critical race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Though Omi and Winant omit any references to the Internet in the updated edition of their seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, this can be accounted for partly by their book's publication date, 1994, a year on the cusp of the Internet's legitimation as a widespread cultural force. It was at this time that pundits debated whether the Internet might be the revolution in communication and human consciousness heralded by its boosters, or whether it might instead prove to be a fad that would, at best, produce an ephemeral technological subculture like that of ham and CB radio enthusiasts. Nonetheless Omi and Winant come to grips with a New Democratic political ideology that had widespread repercussions in the world of Internet policy and its forms of rhetoric. They identify 1992 as the year that marked the beginning of the "emerging hegemony of the racial project of neoliberalism," as Bill Clinton's victorious bid for the presidency was based on a New Democratic platform that "for the first time in almost half a century . . . made no specific pledge to address racial injustices and inequalities."[2] This universalizing discourse proved extremely popular, as it allowed avoidance of all discussion of race in favor of concerns that were perceived as more "universalist," such as funding to support causes dear to suburban dwellers. The hot button of race, invoked particularly by the Los Angeles riots in 1992, resulted in a "neoliberal

project [that] avoids (as far as possible) framing issues or identities racially. . . . To speak of *race* is to enter a terrain where *racism* is hard to avoid. Better to address racism by ignoring race, at least politically." Omi and Winant go so far as to call this agenda a "limited but real adoption of Republican racial politics." This historical moment intersected with the inception of the Internet as a mass technology in the United States. It is in this moment that the neoliberal discourse of color blindness would become linked with the Clinton-Gore administration's identification of the Internet as a privileged aspect of the national political economy. While, as Jon Stratton notes, the 1994 Global Information Infrastructure proposed by Vice President Al Gore at an address in Kyoto depicted the construction of the "information superhighway" backbone as a "humanitarian mission," its core principles as proposed by the International Telecommunication Union were "Private investment. Market-driven competition. Flexible regulatory systems. Non-discriminatory access. And universal service."[3] This emphasis on privacy, competition, lack of regulation, and "nondiscrimination" not only opened the door for the transition from an early-nineties understanding of the Internet as a utopian space for identity play, community building, and gift economies to a more privatized, profit-driven model, one in which the Internet came to function as a "commodity-delivery system for vastly expanded media companies," as Stratton puts it, but it also echoed the language of color blindness or "genteel racism." Vijay Prashad identifies this gentler form of racism as the greatest problem of the twenty-first century—the "color-blind" replaces the color line as the prevailing practice that permits resources to be unevenly allocated based on racial identities.[4] In the philosopher Kelly Oliver's words, "Color blindness is a symptom of racism. Rather than see and acknowledge racial difference, we would rather not see at all. . . . Thus remaining blind to the effects of the sight of race in a racist culture is a symptom of racism."[5] The language of tolerance, or of disavowing racism by simply omitting all language referring to race, functioned to perpetuate digital inequality by both concrete and symbolic means. A visual culture of digital racial formation must take both of these aspects of relatedness to the Internet into account.

The discourse of color blindness is relatively new in American racial politics, and Robert Lee identifies it as a key feature of Cold War liberal ideology. In *Orientals*, he discusses the formation of Asian Americans as a "model minority" after World War II by tracing the ways that the liberal ideology worked to replace biological notions of race, which posited an unassimilable raced body, with the "ethnic" model of race, in which cultural differences replaced racial ones as the salient aspects of identity. Asian Americans were

posed as models of this type of "ethnic" political subject because their low usage of welfare and political docility, along with their successes in the educational system, made them prime examples of racialized subjects who had overcome the barrier of color, or race-as-biology, to become model consumers of commodities as well as creators of economic value: as Lisa Lowe would put it, they were positioned as both labor and capital. They were also seen as ideal liberal subjects in that they were figured as not needing the intervention of the state, particularly in reference to education and technology. "Ethnicity theory met the requirements of liberalism by articulating a doctrine of individual competition in a 'colorblind' society or, in Milton Gordon's view, a society in which the state played a neutral role."[6]

Thus the liberal ideology "articulated a vision of the colorblind society but evaded a critique of the historical category of race altogether." In the nineties, the Clinton-Gore New Democrats continued to avoid the "wedge issue of race." The process of deracializing U.S. political discourse in reference to Internet access that began in 1992 only gained momentum with a crucial change in administration. In 1997, Michael Powell, son of General Colin Powell and a Clinton-appointed minority commissioner who was later appointed head of the FCC by George W. Bush, went on record during his first press conference as saying in reference to the digital divide: "I think that there is a Mercedes divide. I'd like to have one." This rhetoric depicts the Internet as anything but a part of a public national infrastructure, like the "information superhighway" that Gore had posited some years earlier: Powell's phrasing depicts Internet access as an elective luxury like an expensive foreign car. The Internet had gone from being figured as part of a system of transportation and education to being a commodity to which American citizens are certainly not entitled; indeed, in Powell's words, the Internet is and ought to remain a privilege available to relatively few. Powell is also best known for deregulating cable Internet services, facilitating media conglomeration, and "easing the burden on companies that make voice over Internet telephone technology."[7] When the early Internet's historians wish to glorify its interactivity, gift economy, and decentralized structure, they tend to trace its technological and cultural roots to the ethos of the sixties, with its implicit connections to liberation movements such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the hippie movement.[8] However, when we look to the post-2000 graphical popular Internet, this utopian story of the Internet's beginnings in popular culture can be told with a different spin, one that instead tracks its continuing discourse of color blindness in terms of access, user experience, and content that is reflected in the scholar-

ship as well as in nineties neoliberalism's emphasis on "moderate redistribution and cultural universalism."[9] As Anna Everett writes in an eloquent formulation, "The revolution will not be digitized."

A year later, 1996 saw the birth of the interdiscipline of visual culture studies in the United States (also known as "visual studies" in Great Britain), a welcome development that was integrally related to the mainstreaming of the virtual image in aesthetic and popular cultural practice. While visual culture is less interested in communication per se than are other fields, its focus on the production, technology, and reception of the visual image seemed particularly appropriate in relation to the Internet, a form with an increasingly visual bent, a development trajectory measured in months rather than years, a diversifying population of users and producers, a serious and thoroughgoing intervention into American culture and media practices, and a correspondingly crying need for flexible, rigorous, and multimediated forms of analysis. The challenges that the Internet presents to critics and theorists of imaging practices in our contemporary period are serious and myriad: the hybrid form to end all hybrid forms, the Web in particular brings together graphics and textuality, both streaming and still images, synchronous and asynchronous communication, new forms of commerce, amateur and professional production, and community building. Visual culture studies, an interdisciplinary type of theoretical and critical practice with practitioners from all sorts of backgrounds who share a focus on the production of identity in visual forms, seemed particularly well suited to studying an equally hybrid form, the Internet.

My mode of critique in this book is to employ the paradigm of visual culture studies to focus on the ways that users of the Internet collaboratively produce digital images of the body—very particular things for very particular uses—in the context of racial and gender identity formation. While the policy rhetoric around Internet access may have been inflected strongly with the neoliberal discourse of color blindness and nondiscrimination—a paradigm in which failure to overtly discriminate on the basis of race, and the freedom to compete in the "open market" despite an uneven playing field in terms of class, education, and cultural orientation constitutes fairness—the Internet has continued to gain uses and users who unevenly visualize race and gender in online environments. It is crucial that scholarship assess these practices to evaluate the Internet as a popular environment for representations of identity. Visual culture provides a powerful methodology for parsing gender and racial and ethnic identity in these digital signifying practices that became so prominent at the turn of the century. In writing this book, I also

wish to posit a corrective model to distressingly abstract critiques of virtual signifying practices by taking material culture into account in my analysis of online digital bodies. It is crucial to examine users in their embodied subject positions, modes of production, especially amateur and low-end do-it-yourself digital cultures, which are usually more readily adopted by newer and less traditionally skilled or trained users, and the paths by which images of the body are appropriated from other offline media. This is far preferable to an ahistorical type of critique that may prove of little use to future scholars, especially because Internet culture changes so rapidly as to render its particular histories irrecoverable in short order. Thus, just as visual culture studies is bringing its concerns regarding globalization, postcolonial imaging practices, identity formation, gender, and different modes of possessing the gaze to bear on new media, it is all the more important to relate this to the Internet's popular cultures.

In 1996, *October,* a well-respected journal among art historians, critical theorists, and cultural studies scholars, sent a questionnaire to a "range of art and architecture historians, film theorists, literary critics, and artists." This questionnaire has since been credited as a seminal text for creation of the interdiscipline of visual culture in the United States, which has been concerned from its inception with avoiding disciplinarity as a possible trap. The questionnaire's four parts delineated crises within, or challenges to, the academic practice of art history and the ways that the newly emerging interdiscipline of visual culture studies might address them. The questions identify a shift from a primarily historical approach to viewing and understanding the arts to an anthropological one, that is to say, one that emphasizes art as a means of culture creation. Most importantly, a few of the questions identify new media-influenced objects and forms of critique in particular as a driving force for this shift. Question three of the document starts out by claiming that some practitioners in the field had come to view the art object as a "disembodied *image*, re-created in the virtual spaces of sign-exchange and phantasmatic projection." Seeing the image as virtual and disembodied rather than material and concrete posed a radical challenge to art history as it had been practiced until 1996. Netscape Navigator, an apparatus created to disseminate virtual and disembodied images on a mass scale, had been widely distributed only a year before, in 1995. Several of the questionnaire's respondents, such as Carol Armstrong, Susan Buck-Morss, Emily Apter, and David Rodowick, all replied in ways that demonstrated their awareness that new media would change traditional art historical ways of both viewing and producing visual images. While some, like Rodowick, expressed excitement

at the prospect of creating new methods for critique than had ever before existed in art history, others were clearly frustrated that "visual culture" might go the way of cultural studies, a discipline that Apter dubbed "the academic clearing house," and thus depart definitively from art history proper.[10]

Carol Armstrong's critique of the "increasingly cyberspace model of visual studies" and visual culture's "predilection for the disembodied image" is that it produces the concomitant devaluation of material objects in favor of virtual ones, thus reducing the particularity of physical objects to abstract "texts" that are theoretically equivalent to all other "texts" and foreclosing material culture techniques of scholarship that value "foundational differences between media, kinds of production, or modes of signs, or [the ways that] those differences might matter to either the producer or the consumer of a given object." While earlier art criticism viewed art objects as "particular *things* made for particular historical uses," she views new media-influenced forms of criticism such as visual culture studies as oriented around "exchanges circulating in some great, boundless, and often curiously ahistorical economy of images, subjects, and other representations." This "cyberspace model of visual studies," as Armstrong describes it, would foreclose considerations of the *history* of the digital image. This notion that visual images produced or exhibited via computer screens necessarily have no history, no mode of production, no distinct genres, and in short no material culture of their own is indeed frightening, for without these things, art history and indeed most materially based critique can have nothing to say about digital visual images. However, this notion, which was formed in reaction against the perceived deficiencies of what Susan Buck-Morss identifies as visual culture's main concerns—"the reproduction of the image, the society of the spectacle, envisioning the Other, scopic regimes, the simulacrum, the fetish, the (male) gaze, the machine eye"—assumes that a focus on them precludes considerations of history, materiality, and production. Armstrong emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to particular types of expressive production—"literary or pictorial, painterly, sculptural, photographic, filmic, or what have you"—and expresses fears that the "cyberspace model" might ignore these crucial differences. The reduction of all images to sets of binary code seems to pool them all into an undifferentiated soup of bits and bytes, understandably a nightmare for any type of scholarship.

Thus the formation of visual culture studies in the United States was driven from the beginning by a group of American art historians who realized that interdiscipline was needed to account for the digital and saw the digital as driving other concerns at large with visual media of all kinds, such

as "disembodiment" and "cybertheory." This was a significant departure from art history as a critical practice before this time, which had been, as Apter says, concerned with things like "provenance, appraisal, appropriation, [and] authentication." This initial disavowal of the digital by art history is one of the raisons d'être for visual culture; in 1996, scholars trained in visual analysis as art historians conceded that the digital is far too important to be ignored, yet many concluded that its particular histories, intertextualities, modes of materiality and production, technology, and ephemerality either do not exist or do so in such a way that they exceed the range of critique of traditional art history or criticism.

However, as it turns out, many other scholars trained in art history spoke strongly for the relevance and influence of the digital on the field of visual analysis. David Rodowick, a more sanguine contributor to the *October* questionnaire, asserts that the effect of the digital has been to create an "audiovisual culture" in which objects no longer have a material existence as traditionally conceived: "The new media inspire visual studies through an implicit philosophical confrontation. Cinema and the electronic arts are the products of concepts that cannot be recognized by the system of aesthetics, nor should they be." Thus Rodowick posits a shift in the nature of representation itself, begun by cinema and hastened by new media, which renders many of Armstrong's concerns with materiality, history, and production either irrelevant or radically shifted in orientation. Rodowick, along with Nicholas Mirzoeff, Coco Fusco, Lisa Cartright, Marita Sturken, and Stuart Hall, helped to initiate the field of visual culture studies in the academy through their advocacy, which was multidisciplinary in nature (Mirzoeff is an art historian; Sturken and Cartright are media scholars; Fusco is a performance artist, public intellectual, and gender and postcolonial theorist; and Hall is best known as a cultural studies scholar). They have been very successful in this task in a relatively short time, so much so that in 2004 Jonathan Sterne could challenge the perceived hegemony of visual culture approaches to new media by asking "Is Digital Culture Visual Culture?"[11] Since 1996, the date of the questionnaire, visual culture has become a field that has won some disciplinary recognition: it has a well-respected journal, the *Journal of Visual Culture*, which publishes contributions from a wide range of scholars and departments, and schools or programs at several major universities. An examination of the early debates in *October* that initiated the use of visual culture studies in the academy shows us that despite its origins in art history and criticism, visual culture has always been preoccupied with the digital. Lisa Cartright writes that media convergence, an effect of

industrial, technological, and economic forces working to deliver content via different devices and modes of viewing, has resulted in a definitive and permanent blurring between genres like film, television, virtual imaging, and writing, and that visual culture is the most appropriate modality of critique equipped to account for this melding of media that had all previously been separate. She asks: "How does the digital, an aspect of late 20th century visual culture which emerged roughly simultaneously with visual studies, figure into the field?"[12]

The first major book-length work that identifies itself with this orientation in an overt way is Andrew Darley's *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. His critique, which is informed primarily by film history and theory, seeks to understand new media objects through their relationships to earlier types of media simulations, such as rides, amusement parks, and early film forms such as the cinema of attractions. David Bolter and Richard Grusin take a similar tack in *Remediation*, as does Per Persson.[13] The most impressive of these is Lev Manovich, whose brilliant *Language of New Media* is justly credited with creating the first fully articulated theoretical work on the logic of digital media by linking the rigorous affinities between film form and history to the structure and function of computer software and its operations.

However, while Darley, Manovich, and Persson pay close attention to the connections between old and new media forms, reception, and exhibition, none of them writes specifically about the Internet as a platform for digital visual culture. In other words, their critiques neglect the added and determinative element of networking—the facilitation of image production and sharing via linked computers. They write about computer-generated images and simulations as if they were texts and technologies that address the viewer in particular ways, but assume only one viewer; and when interactivity is discussed, it is in reference to the interface itself, rather than with other users. In other words, these critics write about digital visuality as if it were a medium like radio, television, or film, rather than as a mode of communication, like the telephone or the telegraph. This tendency of visual culture to omit considerations of the realm of communication, focusing instead on representations and signification that occur between a visual medium and a viewer, can be traced to its roots in the critical humanities. To use an acronym borrowed from the language of communication scholars, visual-culture-oriented analyses of digital culture concern themselves with HCI (human-computer interaction) rather than CMC (computer-mediated communication). This accounts for the lack of scholarship on digital visual culture

that deals with the Internet specifically, despite the Internet's penetration of every media space discussed in their works, such as gaming, film, and art.

New media studies in the United States consists of two branches: humanistic, consisting of literary and media theorists; and empirical or social scientific, consisting of communication, sociology, and information studies scholars. Visual culture studies has the potential to intervene powerfully in the study of new media if it is prepared to discuss the Internet and shared spaces of online communication and identity formation. In addition, communication studies has much to gain from visual culture approaches to the Internet, which would help to parse the complex visual fields that we inhabit and that condition our interactions when we use shared digital networks. However, the discipline of communication studies is no more prepared to analyze the forms of digital images, their meanings, deployments, modes of signification, and techniques for creating identity than art historians were to write about online bulletin board discussions or Internet chat sessions.[14] Discourse analysis of chat tends to elide considerations of the visual field aside from instrumental ones about interface ease of use. While some scholarship on racial and gender difference has been published in the fields of communication studies and digital culture, it tends to center more on reportages of online community building and niche groups creating Web sites for ethnic identity purposes, with little attention paid to a site's look, aesthetics, or specifically visual culture.[15] To sum up, studies of digital visual culture have yet to discuss networking, social spaces, or power relations in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, but have done a superb job at parsing the history of digitality's address to the eye. Studies from a communications perspective have discussed the dynamics of online interaction quite exhaustively but fail to integrate their findings into readings of what the sites do visually.

This is a serious omission, because the Internet has become an integral part of the visual culture of everyday life for the majority of citizens of the United States. Social and technological practices like Instant Messenger (IM) engender new communicative practices and new visual forms, including but also exceeding the form of electronic writing, and their mutual constitution of these two layers of meaning making conditions the sorts of interactions that can be had on them. CMC occurs within a thriving, complex, ephemeral, and dynamic visual field with its own history, political economy, and engagement with racial and gender politics. Visual culture critique is concerned with tracing the genealogies of media use in new media, identifying specificities of genres or kinds of production and imaging practices, and producing readings of images that gesture toward identity formation in

the matrix of power. This is a crucial omission, because young people use IM a great deal. Chapter 1 of this book discusses the visual field of IM and its evolution from text-only forms of chat toward a form that includes user-chosen and user-produced digital images of the body as an integral part of communication, signification, gendering, and racialization. Technological convergence is making all HCI spaces potential spaces for CMC, and vice versa. The continued existence of digital inequality necessitates considerations of identity and power relations—racial formation—along the axes of race, gender, and class. While Manovich's *Language of New Media* stresses the importance of interfaces as vectors of ideology, there has yet to be a visually oriented critique of new media networked communications on the most popular network to date—the Internet—which considers these issues of raced and gendered bodies, both virtual and real.

Visual culture studies was born in response to a crisis in art history: it is an insurgent art criticism that merges at some points with cultural studies but has different foundational texts that are oriented toward constructed social identities and a concern with the visual apparatus. Art history is a long-standing and canonized field in the letters and sciences and had become mired in debates regarding its adherence to traditional modes of analyzing visual objects that resulted in many scholars identifying against it. In theorizing digital racial formation theory, I am proposing a somewhat insurgent response to new media studies, a move that may seem premature considering its recent vintage. However, there are many advantages to correcting the omission in new media studies of gender, race, class, and communication as quickly as possible. Digital racial formation can trace the ways that race is formed online using visual images as part of the currency of communication and dialogue between users. Performing close readings of digital visual images on the Internet and their relation to identity, itself now an effect as well as a cause of digitality, produces a kind of critique that takes account of a visual practice that is quickly displacing television as a media-based activity in the United States.[16]

Several visual culture anthologies have had a hand in shaping the field and its engagement with new media. Three of the most influential—Nicholas Mirzoeff's *Introduction to Visual Culture* and *Visual Culture Reader* (first and second editions), Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall's *Visual Culture: The Reader,* and John Walker and Sarah Chaplin's *Visual Culture: An Introduction*—display varying degrees of engagement with digital culture. Armstrong's fears of ungrounded "cyber critiques" that might be generated by visual culture studies are laid to rest after perusing these volumes, because they take pains to

ground themselves in the history of media imaging and technologies, especially Evans and Hall's. While all share a basis in theoretical writings by Althusser, Barthes, Benjamin, Foucault, and Debord, Evans and Hall's anthology, for example, includes a section on photography as an industry, social practice, and imaging convention that takes its material and historical base very seriously. However, this anthology lacks a section or any substantial articles on new media, in contrast to Mirzoeff's and Walker's, which both contain extensive cyberculture sections. Mirzoeff's, which is titled "Virtuality: Virtual Bodies, Virtual Spaces," departs from tradition in that it occurs in the middle of the volume rather than as a terminal section, as it does in Walker's. However, both anthologies make clear the centrality of new media studies to the study of visual culture: indeed, Mirzoeff defines visual culture as the study of "visual technologies . . . any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet."[17] This centering of the Internet as a visual medium on a par with television and painting is reflected in the second edition of the volume, which increases the number of articles on cyberculture by retitling the section "Global/Digital" and adding a terminal subsection under "The Gaze, the Body and Sexuality" titled "Technobodies/Technofeminism."

While the Mirzoeff and Hall anthologies have sections on racial difference and postcoloniality, indicating the serious degree to which visual culture studies concerns itself with questions of difference and the gaze, only Mirzoeff's combines this with an overt interest in the Internet. Like Armstrong, Hall critiques "cybertheory" along with the branch of literary and textually inflected cultural studies approaches from which it springs and proceeds to position visual culture studies as an antidote to cybertheory's excessive abstraction: he imagines visual culture studies, with its focus on the "specific rhetoric, genres, institutional contexts and uses of visual imagery," as a corrective to "getting lost in the more global identification of cultural trends and their epic narratives of transformations of consciousness in the rubric of postmodern culture."[18] Critics such as Baudrillard, Virilio, Stone, and Shaviro, who posit a wholesale shift in human consciousness as a result of "prosthetic" culture and its attendant discourse of "posthumanism," strike Hall as overly metaphysical and unsubstantiated. This problem was exacerbated by the tendency of much of this kind of scholarship to eschew close readings or detailed specific discussions of particular online practices. In addition, as Tom Foster eloquently details: "The debates about posthumanism demonstrate that there is no fixed meaning either to the understanding of embodiment as plastic and malleable—that is, open to critical intervention—

because socially constructed. In the context of postmodern technocultures and their disembodying tendencies, the materiality of embodiment, consciousness, and human nature can constitute a form of resistance, while at the same time the denaturalization of embodied identities, intended as a historicizing gesture, can change little or nothing" in relation to received hegemonies of gender and race.[19] Foster rightly stresses the "necessity of identifying the racial subtexts that inform the various transformations summed up under the heading of the 'posthuman,'" and his study of cyberpunk narratives works to identify that essential "materiality of embodiment" that underlies and underwrites the possibilities of technologically enabled body and identity transformations (xxiv). Online practices of visualizing bodies have, far from defining users as "posthuman," come to constitute part of the everyday material activity of information seeking and communicating that defines membership in the information society.

Visual culture's engagement with the substance of images holds particular promise and offers critical purchase precisely when brought to bear on digital objects, which do possess distinctive cultures of bodily representation, flow, privacy, identity, and circulation and have created unique communicative and institutional contexts. The purpose of this book is to turn the lens of visual culture studies as grounded in these contexts on a topic that has received little attention from scholars of new media: the popular Internet and its depictions of racialized and gendered bodies.

In earlier work I discussed the ways in which the Internet facilitates identity tourism, creating a new form of digital play and ideological work that helped define an empowered and central self against an exotic and distant Other.[20] However, because the Internet has become an everyday technology for many Americans since that time, the postmillennial Internet has little to gain by identifying itself as an exotic form of travel or access to novel experiences. The adoption of the Internet by many more women and users of color since the nineties has occasioned innumerable acts of technological appropriation, a term Ron Eglash deploys to describe what happens when users with "low social power" modify existing technologies such as the Internet. While in *Cybertypes* I focused on the constraints inherent in primarily textual interfaces that reified racial categories, in this work I locate the Internet as a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies. In the early nineties the popular Internet was still a nascent media practice, one in which default whiteness and maleness were the result of serious digital divides that resulted in primarily male and white users. Since

then, the Internet's user populations have become much more diverse. This has resulted in an explosion of use that has all but eliminated the sense of a default normative identity in all parts of cyberspace; there are many Internet spaces, such as pregnancy bulletin boards, blogs, and livejournals that may now assume a default female user, and others such as petition and dating Web sites that assume users of color.

This book traces that ongoing history since the era of the text-only niche Internet, which was used by a much more exclusive and exclusionary group of users, to its present state as a mass-media form with a popular (but still far from racially balanced) American audience. My readings of digital representations of the body created for deployment on the postgraphical Internet since 2000 attempt to trace a cultural formation in motion, to read it back through its referents in old media and earlier racial formations, in order to write a digital history of the present. We are in a moment of continual and delicate negotiation between the positions of the object and the subject of digital visual culture. To repurpose Omi and Winant's influential theory of racial formation, in this book I wish to posit a theory of *digital racial formation,* which would parse the ways that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with this ongoing process. While scholars from a variety of disciplines have produced valuable work that traces the history of digital racial formation, in many cases predating the Internet and the World Wide Web, and have revealed the ways in which people of color have had extensive involvements with digital technologies, such as music sampling, telecommunications in the context of forms of urban labor like taxi driving, and complex forms of indigenous weaving, these have not been especially visual, and their emphasis on recovering suppressed histories of racialized involvements with technologies has purposely de-emphasized the Internet as a way of reframing the digital divide discourse that persistently envisioned users of color as backward and uninvolved in technology.[21]

Studies of cyberculture have long noted, for good or ill, the identification of a mobile perspective in the context of networked communications with a privileged, omnipotent, yet fragmented gaze. Scholars and critics write about interactivity as if it were a drug, the drug of choice for cultural elites or "networked subjects." "'Choice,' 'presence,' 'movement,' 'possibility' are all terms which could describe the experiential modalities of websurfing," as Tara McPherson writes, and during the Web's relatively short commercial history, they have been integral to the rhetoric of the new networked economy that sells "choice and possibility" as a side effect of digital/analog media convergence.[22] This celebration of fulfilled user volition can be, as she points

out, illusory, especially when linked to the enhanced ability to buy things with one click. However, the distinction here seems to be between different varieties of user experience, to paraphrase William James; while there are disagreements about just how empowering digital interactivity may be, there seems little argument about its offering its users more in the way of agency. Indeed, there is a way in which possessing the "volitional mobility" afforded by the Web, in particular, constitutes a particular kind of viewing subject, one who possesses and is empowered by "visual capital."[23] The Internet has created and defined digital visual capital, a commodity that we mark as desirable by conferring on it the status of a language unto itself; we speak now of digital literacy as well as visual and the ordinary sort of literacy. Manovich's *The Language of New Media* presumes that digital media constitute a new logic or typology of meaning. Though he is careful to interrogate this assumption, it is often claimed that interactivity is the salient aspect of this language that distinguishes it from others. Interactivity is envisioned as empowering—the act of clicking and moving one's perspective in the context of the dynamic screen is figured as creating interacting subjects. The myriad ways that interactivity creates a fragmented and decentered subject have been the target of recent critiques; Hall's and Armstrong's are fairly typical. In this book I wish to ground my discussion of the popular Internet and its involvement in the process of digital racial formation by examining the ways that visual capital is created, consumed, and circulated on the Internet. If we are starting to understand what the *subject* of interactivity might look like or be formed, what or who is its *object*?

For there must be one. Parks defines visual capitalism as "a system of social differentiation based on users'/viewers' *relative* access to technologies of global media."[24] This is welcome language in that it stresses *ongoing* processes of differentiation in access, rather than assuming that access to technologies like the Internet are binary; either you "have" or "have not." The problematic that I wish to delineate here has to do with parsing the multiple gradations and degrees of *access* to digital media, and the ways that these shadings are contingent on variables such as class position, race, nationality, and gender. However, it is important to avoid reifying these terms, and to instead stress that they are, in part, constituted by the subject's relation to these very technologies of global media. These questions of identity constitution via digital technologies have tended to get elided in critical discussions of Internet access, or when they are discussed, it is often as inconvenient stumbling blocks that stand in the way of the ultimate goal: universal access. What has yet to be explored are the ways that race and gender permit

differential access to digital visual capital, as well as the distinctive means by which people of color and women create and in some sense redefine it. Women and people of color are both subjects and objects of interactivity; they participate in digital racial formation via acts of technological appropriation, yet are subjected to it as well.

In John Berger's influential visual culture primer *Ways of Seeing,* the subject is defined as that which views, and the object as that which submits or is subjected to the gaze: he dubs these two positions that of the "surveyor" and the "surveyed."[25] He is most famously concerned with the gendering operations of the gaze in portraiture and pornography, but his success in creating a critical framework and methodology has much to do with his parsing of power relations in the field of the visual. Digital visual culture presents a challenge to this formulation: while the difference between the viewer and the viewed, the producer/artist and the subject/model, was clear in more traditional art (while reading Berger, it is always clear who he means by "artist," "spectator/owner," and "object" of representation), it is not so clear when discussing networked digital media. New media are produced and consumed differently. In addition, we often get the double layer of performance that comes with the viewer's act of clicking.

So rather than focusing on the idea that women and minorities need to get online, we might ask: How do they use their digital visual capital? In what ways are their gendered and racialized bodies a form of this new type of capital? What sort of laws does this currency operate under? It doesn't change everything, but what does it change? This brings us back to the privileging of interactivity and its traditional linkage with the creation of a newly empowered subject.

According to Lev Manovich's provocative "myth of interactivity," "interactive media ask us to identify with someone else's mental structure." Rather than allowing the user to have an open-ended, seemingly limitless and boundless experience of reading, Manovich stresses the rigidity of hyperlinking as a mode of experiencing information: when "interactive media asks us to click on a highlighted sentence to go to another sentence . . . we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations."[26] According to this interpretation, we are ideologically interpellated into the "new media designer's mental trajectory," just as in Hollywood film we are asked to "lust after and try to emulate the body of the movie star." Manovich's formulation allows us to trace the process of identification that occurs with new media use: he compares it to the viewer's process of identification with the star's body in the realm of film. And just as we have a well-developed theory of

cultural capital and viewer identification involving stars, so too must we now view the interface as an object that compels particular sorts of identifications, investments, ideological seductions, and conscious as well as unconscious exercises of power.[27] In addition, just as star bodies provoke the viewer's gaze and must necessarily function as part of what Omi and Winant call a "racial project," so too do new media objects. Interactivity is indeed a myth and will remain so until and unless its participation in the gendered and racialized construction and distribution of embodied perspectives, or particular "mental trajectories" (a far from neutral term), is examined in light of cultural formation theory. New media designers are not yet movie stars, but as interfaces become ubiquitous means of accessing media of all kinds, their work enters the popular sphere and the public culture, and hence a corresponding interest in their modes of instantiating identity—their unavoidable implication in creating "mental trajectories" that we must all follow—must emerge from cultural and media theory. Instead the interface itself becomes a star, and just like other sorts of stars, it works to compel racialized identifications; interfaces are prime loci for digital racial formation.

Part of the attraction of racial formation theory as espoused by Omi and Winant originally, and subsequently by the cultural theorists Lisa Lowe, Paul Gilroy, and George Lipsitz, is its impressive flexibility: it is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed . . . a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized."[28] The Internet certainly represents and organizes human bodies and social structures in digital games, Web sites, CMC applications such as IM (Instant Messenger) and IRC (Internet Relay Chat) that involve a visual component, as well as in myriad interfaces. The interface serves to organize raced and gendered bodies in categories, boxes, and links that mimic both the mental structure of a normative consciousness and set of associations (often white, often male) and the logic of digital capitalism: to click on a box or link is to acquire it, to choose it, to replace one set of images with another in a friction-free transaction that seems to cost nothing yet generates capital in the form of digitally racialized images and performances. "Racial projects," defined by Omi and Winant as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines," produce race and initiate changes in power relations (125). When users create or choose avatars on the Internet, they are choosing to visually signify online in ways that must result in a new organization and distribution of visual cultural capital.

Racial formation theory has not often been used in reference to new media, however, partly because the frame of reference is so different (and because the early utopian bent to Internet criticism meant that discussions of difference, especially if viewed as "divisive," were avoided). The difference between old and new media lies in the new media's interactivity, as mentioned before, but is also related to the blurred line between producers and consumers. Though utopian claims regarding the Internet's ability to abolish the position of the passive viewer, making everyone a potential publisher or creator of media, are less valid than previously thought (early predictions about everyone's eventually having or even wanting a personal home page have fallen far short of reality, though the popularity of blogs, vlogs, and social networks such as Facebook and MySpace are coming closer to this ideal), it is possible now, since the massification of the Internet in the United States, which is my frame of reference, to view media on the Internet as the product of non–cultural elites.

Since the turn of the century, the continuum of Internet access in the United States has gotten wider and broader—it is best compared to Rich's lesbian continuum and Parks's formulation of varying degrees of visual capital in the sense that everyone has *some* position in relation to it. Rather than a "digital divide" that definitively separates information haves from have-nots, the Internet has occasioned a wide range of access to digital visual capital, conditioned by factors such as skill and experience in using basic Internet functions such as "search" in addition to less-nuanced questions such as whether or not one possesses access at all.[29] While earlier racial formation theory assumed that viewers were subject to media depictions or racial projects that contributed to racialization, and that these projects were ongoing and differential but nonetheless worked in a more or less one-way fashion, new media can look to an increasingly vital digital cultural margin or counterculture for resistance.

AIM buddies, pregnant avatars, and other user-created avatars allow users to participate in racial formation in direct and personal ways and to transmit these to large, potentially global audiences of users. Intersectional critical methods are vital here; digital visual culture critique needs to read both race and gender as part of mutually constitutive formations. For example, in the case of sports gaming, most celebrity avatars are men because of the dominance of men in the commercial sports industry, and many of them are black for the same reason. Yet black men are underrepresented as game designers, and it would be wrongheaded to mistake the plurality of racialized

digital bodies in blockbuster games such as Electronic Arts' *Madden Football* to indicate any kind of digital equality in terms of race or gender.

What does an object of interactivity look like? In Jennifer Lopez's music video "If You Had My Love" (1999) the singer portrays herself as the object, not the subject, of the volitional mobility afforded the Web user. Shots of Lopez tracked by surveillance cameras alternate with her image as represented in a Web site: she shares the stage and gaze with the new media design interfaces in which she is embedded in an extremely overt way. This puts a new spin on the traditional female position as object of the gaze. While the video and its implied Web interface allow the user multiple points of entry into her digital image—streaming, still, live, buffered—Lopez herself is never represented as the user or viewer of this communicative technology, only as the viewed. In this way, the video gestures toward the traditional formulation of the gaze as described by John Berger in relation to traditional portraiture and the tradition of painting and visual representation generally. In other words, Lopez presents herself in this video as an *object of interactivity*, despite her position as the star and the knowing object of the interactive gaze. Examining this video enables a double viewing of interactivity and the star's body, the way that the object of desire (the star) can work with the subject of interactivity—figured misleadingly in this video as the user. In fact, it is really the invisible interface designer whose work conditions the limits and possibilities of interactivity in this case; if we view the media complex that is J. Lo as herself a carefully constructed "racial project," we can see the ways that the range of clickable options and categories available to the presumptive user in this video conditions the sorts of understandings of her raciality that are articulated to us. In this video we are asked to identify not just with the Web designer's way of thinking but with the viewer's way of clicking as well. The conditions of watching this video require us to see from the computer user's perspective; we cannot but shoulder-surf, since the setup only allows us to view the star's body by watching her movements on a Web site, a Web site that we do not control or click through. This is also a decidedly gendered gaze, since we are often put in a position in which we must watch a male watcher watching; we must witness his interactivity as our means to visualize the body of the woman.

In this video we have access to the star's body *through* the viewer's mind. We see her as he sees her, though interface use. This split represents a paradigmatic dichotomy in gender theory: the body is that of the Latina, the woman of color, and the mind is that of a white man. As Donna Haraway

writes in her famous "Manifesto for Cyborgs," an essay that Csordas describes as "an anxious celebration of our contemporary transformation into cyborgs,"[30] the "offshore woman" or the woman of color in the integrated circuit of information technology production is framed as an object rather than a subject of interactivity. There is much at stake, however, in observing the ways that members of the Fourth World—women of color, members of linguistic and ethnic minority cultures, the global underclass—negotiate their identities as digital objects and in incremental ways move them toward digital subjecthood. The reason for this is that, as Chela Sandoval stresses quite strongly in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, a work that takes Haraway's notion of the cyborg subject and develops it into a strategy for acquiring power for women of color in the context of a technologized world, "the methodology of the oppressed can now be recognized as the mode of being best suited to life under neocolonizing postmodern and highly technologized conditions in the first world; for to enter a world where any activity is possible in order to ensure survival is to enter a cyberspace of being."[31] In other words, it is precisely because the world inhabited by wired, technologized, privileged subjects requires constantly shifting and contingent work skills, educational preparation, and cultural expertise that the "technologies developed by subjugated populations to negotiate this realm of shifting meanings" can prove indispensable. The Fourth World has always been "just-in-time," having lacked the luxury of guarantees and assurances of care from the state. Indeed, Jennifer Lopez's deployment of shifting visions of ethnicity brokered through Web and television interfaces represents this sort of impressively flexible range of movement through identity positions, one that seeks its niche through the volitional mobility of the interacting viewer.

This music video, Jennifer Lopez's first, was number one for nine weeks in 1999. Lopez's DVD biography on "Feelin' So Good" informs us that "If You Had My Love" was her first number one single, as well as her first video, and that it was certified platinum. The hit topped the Hot 100 for five weeks in 1999, and the single sold 1.2 million copies outside the United States as of 2000. Importantly, the biography describes her as a "multimedia success." In keeping with this notion, it was also digital from the ground up, not just in terms of its production, though much is made of its links with the Web in the "Banned from the Ranch" Web site. (Banned from the Ranch is the name of the production company that programmed the fictional Web interface deployed in the film.) Its subject matter, the way that it compartmentalizes physical space, virtual space, music genre niches, and modes of interaction, is in keeping with the logic of new media as explained in

Manovich's seminal work on the topic: it combines modularity and automaticity with the added benefit of simulated liveness. In addition, Jennifer Lopez's rise as star coincides with the Internet's rise as a mainstream visual culture with its own interventions into traditional media cultures. In 1999 we can witness the shift occurring from one mode of influence, old media to new, to another, new media to old.

Like the *Matrix* films, the "If You Had My Love" video visually represents active navigation through data. Clicking on links enables the implied viewer to loop through time: by backtracking, the viewer can instantly restart at the beginning of the video or rewind to watch a favorite bit repeatedly. However, unlike these films and other science fiction films, the video presumes multichanneled viewing in the context of everyday life rather than in an overtly fictional and phantasmatic future. The video opens with a scene of a man sitting at his computer desk in a darkened room of his apartment and typing the words "Jennifer Lopez" into a search field in a Web browser. Her Web site pops up on his screen, and she starts singing and dancing as he watches, alternately typing on the keyboard, which he holds on his lap as he leans back and strokes his own neck and face in an overtly cybersexual gesture. (Early writing on virtual identity by Sandy Stone posited that phone sex was the best metaphor for Internet-enabled telepresence; Lopez's video acknowledges Stone's assertion with a nod to the Internet's most technologically sophisticated, long-standing, and profitable usage: distributing visual images of pornography.)[32] The rest of the video consists of scenes of Jennifer Lopez viewed through her as-yet-fictional Web site as we witness people in a wide selection of networked computing environments watching her: we see a young girl in her bedroom with her computer, a pair of mechanics watching a wall-mounted television with an Internet connection, a rank of call center workers with headphones and computers, and two young Latina women using a laptop in their kitchen. These scenes clearly reference television/Internet convergence as they depict both public and private televisual screens and solitary and shared instances of screen usage.

But more importantly this is one of the most intimate scenes of computer interface usage I can remember seeing; intimate because it is about desire mediated through the computer, men masturbating as they surf the Web to look at sexy images of celebrity female bodies.[33] It is also intimate because it is *close;* as we watch the man keyboarding and mousing, we see Lopez's image respond interactively to it; as he manipulates his joystick, we see a large black ceiling-mounted surveillance camera follow her into one of her "rooms," and computer windows pop up, close, promote, demote, and

Figure I.1. A fictional graphical interface from "If You Had My Love."

Figure I.2. Musical genres as menu choices in the Netbot graphical interface from "If You Had My Love."

Figure I.3. Male spectatorial desire and Internet use in "If You Had My Love."

layer in response to his typing and clicking. The page on the site titled "Jennifer's Rooms" lists buttons and icons for "Corridor, Living Room, Shower, Hair Dryer, Bathroom, and Dressing Room," thus spatializing the Web site in terms that evoke the star's private home and the space of intimacy. The surveillance cameras and arrangement of the interface as clickable "rooms" enforce webbed voyeurism, evoking the visual culture of liveness through Webcams, and a particular sort of eroticized, privileged view of the star. (Of course, videos have always purported to give a privileged look at a star. The fiction of volitional viewing enacted in this video is a fantasy of networking in the context of interactivity.) Indeed, the video visualizes the interface user's volitional mobility via the cursor, which functions as his proxy in this scene, as it does when we use the World Wide Web generally. We are seeing as he sees: it is an act of witnessing voyeurism. But more importantly we are seeing the mechanics by which he manipulates the view of Lopez as the video's audience watches; the apparatus of the keyboard, mouse, and joystick is foregrounded and in constant use.

The Jennifer Lopez online page features navigation links at the bottom for "Gallery, Lopez Dance, and Jennifer's Rooms." The video as a whole operates as a record of a navigational session within multiple nested interface frames, one of which is called "Internet TV," overtly referencing a greatly anticipated technological convergence that still has yet to arrive and was certainly far from a reality in 1999. The other menus we see at the bottom

of the initial interface's splash screen are "sights and sounds, chat, links, views, news & info, contests, gallery," thus displaying the conventional organization and categorization of media types common to conventional Web sites rather than television or video.

This video's mode of production differs quite a bit from those that came before it (but helped to determine those that came after), and this difference is the basis for a fascinating press release by Banned by the Ranch, the production company hired to create the computer interfaces featured in the video. Why did the video's producers feel the need to commission a fictional interface and browser in their attempt to invoke the World Wide Web? The producers address this question quite explicitly on their Web site, explaining that Web-savvy audiences in the nineties require "realistic looking interfaces" to create *televisual* verisimilitude; in other words, in order for the virtual to look realistic, interfaces have to look like they could be "real" as well, and in this case the "real"—Internet Explorer, Netscape, or AOL's proprietary browsers, which were familiar to Internet users at that time—just wouldn't do. This creation of a brand-new interface might also be motivated by some caution regarding copyright law—Apple's "look and feel" lawsuit against Windows had recently brought the notion of the interface as private property into the public eye. In addition, there may also have been concerns regarding conflicts of interest. For example, the films *You've Got Mail* (1998) and *Little Black Book* (2004) feature America Online and Palm personal assistant interfaces prominently; in the first case, corporate partnerships or "synergy" between media companies made this possible, and in the second, conflicting industry interests almost scuttled the project. Problems arose when executives at Sony Pictures Entertainment, one of the companies that was to distribute the film *Little Black Book,* realized that Sony manufactured its own PDA device, the Clié, which competed for market share with Palm. Luckily, the film was greenlighted *after* the Clié went out of production, solving Sony's conflict of interest problem regarding interface use. Giving screen time in a mass-market film to a particular interface has always been seen as an exceedingly valuable form of marketing or product placement, particularly because the logic of the films usually requires that viewers pay close attention to the devices to follow important plot points. The device itself is less the point than is the foregrounding of a particular type of screen within a screen, an interface.

As mentioned before, the interface is itself a star of Lopez's video and is coming to take on starring roles in other types of non-desktop-based digital

media, like films, videos, and console games. Creating a fictional interface solves potential problems with industry conflicts as well as contributing toward the sense of an alternative networked world accessible through the desktop computer, giving yet one more means of control to media producers. The deployment and visualization of "fictional software" created for Lopez's video, which was dubbed "NetBot" by Banned from the Ranch and originally developed for the graphics on the hit youth film *American Pie*, envisions software interfaces as key aspects of a televisual image's believability or realness. It is interesting to note that the production of the video preceded that of the star's "real" Web site: Banned by the Ranch's "intention was to make sure the videos' web site would match the real-life Jennifer Lopez web site . . . a site that was yet to be developed" in 1999, a time in which it was clear that the music video was a crucial medium for musicians finding a global market, while the Internet was not. The Lopez site was ultimately designed by Kioken, a high-flying and innovative Web site design business that went bankrupt in 2001.

The "Lopez Dance" screen offers several menu choices: "Jazz, Latin Soul, and House" (we don't see "Jazz" enacted in the diegetic space of the embedded performance, perhaps because this is one of the few popular genres that Lopez is not associated with in any way; it represents a purely speculative and fictional future, one that has a racialized authenticity all its own). Articulating these musical genres highlights the star's diversity, ironic in the case of "If You Had My Love," which, like most of Lopez's other songs, borrows liberally from these genres but doesn't itself recognizably belong to any genre at all except pop, and works as a way to sell and brand otherwise unidentifiable music, very important when half of all music that is listened to is not sold to a listener but rather "shared" among listeners, or stolen. The "Latin Soul" sequence, launched when the male viewer clicks on the link that activates it, depicts Lopez in a short, tight white dress as she performs flamenco-inspired arm gestures and salsa-type moves to techno-salsa music. This musical interlude functions like a cut scene in a video game such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *GTA: San Andreas* in that it fragments the narrative and in this case the musical flow. The logic of abrupt movement from one genre of music or media to another reflects the fragmented attention of the viewer, tempted as he is by the array of choices presented by the interface. We are switched from one to another at his pleasure. The pleasure of the interface lies partly in its power to control movement between genres and partly in the way that it introduces musical genres that audiences

may not have known even existed. J. Lo's readiness to fill different musical, national, and ethnic niches reflects the logic of the video and of the interface and its audiences; as she shifts from cornrowed hip-hop girl with baggy pants and tight shirts to high-heeled Latina diva to generic pop star with straightened hair and yoga pants, we see the movement as well between identities that characterizes her construction in this video as a digital media object of interactivity. She becomes an object of volitional ethnicity as she is constructed as an object of the user's volitional mobility.

Most importantly, this video walks the viewer through a process of digital racial formation; in a cut scene that functions as the transition to the world "inside" the interface that we see when it is clicked, shards and bits of gray confetti take flight past the viewer's perspective to represent the way data is supposed to look. As this "white noise" resolves itself into a signal, a coherent visual image coalesces from these pieces of data into images of Jennifer Lopez dancing in the nationalized and racialized genre that the user has chosen, and we can see the formation of the colored and gendered body from undifferentiated pixels, at the pleasure of the viewer, and also the formation of the bodies of color, race, language, and nation as playing particular roles, performing particular work, in the context of new media. Like J. Lo, Filipino and Russian Internet "brides" are also clickable, women who can be randomly accessed via the Web. Their performances online are certainly different in kind and quality from that of the site's designer or user: their job is to perform a kind of racialized submission, to the viewer's interactive gaze and to the geopolitics that compel their digitized visual identity performance. In the case of the video, the cursor functions as a visual proxy that in this case stands in for the viewer; it is itself a kind of avatar and in recent times a televisual stylistic convention familiar to us in all sorts of contexts, used in PowerPoint presentations as well as in children's programming, such as *Dora the Explorer*'s use of the computer cursor superimposed on the screen as a point of identification for children. Though Dora's viewers can't control the cursor, they can witness the cursor's movements and implied user control, thus enforcing visual if not functional media convergence between the computer and the television. Sarah Banet Weiser's work on *Dora* emphasizes the ways in which race is marketed as a "cool" way to help children learn language skills, one that hails Latino and other viewers of color in ambivalent, largely apolitical, and "postracial" ways.[34] *Dora the Explorer* depicts the Latina main character as an avatar who guides the child-viewer through the logic of the learning-game interface but does not stand in for the viewer herself: the Latina Dora is an object rather than a subject of

interactivity, just as Nickelodeon posits the show's audience as primarily white, middle-class, and able to afford cable, rather than as viewers who "look like" Dora herself.

The visual culture of the female object (rather than subject) of interactivity has yet to be written. The varied audiences depicted watching Jennifer Lopez via streaming video online represent varied subject and object positions and points of gender and ethnic identification: black men and white men from both the working class and the growing ranks of information workers at a call center and from the home office click on her as an object of desire; young girls in suburbia and young Latina women in domestic spaces click on her as an object of identification in a gesture of interactivity that may have something to do with staking out a position as a future subject of interactivity. Surveillance cameras, a technology whose function is to police the division between subject/object relations, are depicted here in the context of the Internet as a means to give instant and interactive access to the star to all groups. The early promise of the Internet to make every user a potential "star" has since contracted to offer seemingly deeper or more intimate user access to stars from "old" media instead. The history of the Webcammed image, traced by Steven Shaviro from its origins in the Trojan Room Coffee Machine in the computer laboratory at Cambridge University, which went online in 1991, to Jennifer Ringley's Jennicam, which went online in 1996 (and has since gone offline), reveals a progression from an original fascination with the apparatus of webbed vision itself—the "liveness" of the Webcammed image, even in relation to an object as intrinsically unexciting as a pot of coffee—to a particular investment in the naked female body as an object of vision via the Internet.[35]

The thesis of this video is the thesis that describes our media landscape since 1999: convergence has created a condition within which stardom itself has become "multimedia." It is nothing new for stars to excel in multiple media: actors sing, dancers act, singers dance, and many stars have marketed perfumes, clothing, and other commodities successfully. These provide multiple modes of identification with stars. However, the "If You Had My Love" video sells multiple points of entry to the star, multiple ways of seeing and surveilling that are framed as exactly that, exploiting the interface as a visual culture that purveys an ideal and mutable female body of color, perpetually and restlessly shifting "just in time" to meet fickle audience preferences. In this book, I trace how the mediation of digital user and object identity as citizens, women, and commodities on the Internet is regulated and conditioned by the types of interfaces used to classify, frame, and link them.

To argue for the necessary intervention of visual culture studies into Internet studies, one might ask: how does the Internet's visual culture create, withhold, foreclose, distribute, deny, and modulate the creation of visual and digital capital? Visual media are as often as not viewed through the lens (and logic) of the computer-driven interface, making ways of negotiating, navigating, and situating oneself via its landscape of chapter titles, hyperlinks, and menus a necessary aspect of media use. DVDs, satellite and cable television and radio, and DVRs like TiVo and Replay all compel menu trees of choices, choices that, when made, foreclose other choices. The narrowing and piecing-up of the formerly continuous image stream of a film into named and discrete chapters, as in the case of many commercial cinematic DVDs, and the separation of songs into genres like "Electronica," "Boombox," and "R and B/Urban," as in the case of Sirius satellite radio playlists, breaks up what had been a more flow-oriented media experience into digitized separate "streams" (or "channels," as Sirius labels them). This packetizing of media into different categories follows ethnic, linguistic, national, and racialized lines. The "If You Had My Love" video mirrors this logic of the interface and its policing of categories by chopping up and streaming the star's image-body into identifiable ethnic and racialized modes—black, white, and brown.

Jennifer Lopez has been dubbed a multimedia star partly because she appears in several electronic media, but she also has established herself in the world of offline, nonephemeral commodities such as fashion and toiletries. This convergence of separate spheres—"real" versus virtual, abstract versus concrete commodities—mirrors the convergence of media displayed in her video, and also her own converging of differing positions vis-à-vis her own ethnic identity. Her real-life transformation from an "ethnic star," defined primarily by her appearances in "ethnic films" such as *Selena* and *Mi Familia* in which her racialized Latina body serves to authenticate the "realness" of the Latino mise-en-scène, to a "global" or unracialized star, as in *Out of Sight* and *The Wedding Planner,* is mirrored in the video's modes of identity management via the interface.[36] The interface lets you "have" Jennifer Lopez in a variety of ethnic and racialized modes by clicking on one of many links.[37] It addresses the audience by figuring her kinetic body as plastic, part of a racial project of volitional racialization through interface usage.

The "If You Had My Love" video compels a different sort of media analysis than had been necessary before the massification of networked, interfaced visual communications like the Internet. Earlier modes of reading

television and film do not suffice because of the prominence of the interface as more than just a framing device; interfaces function as a viewing apparatus, and in many cases they create the conditions for viewing. Rigorous readings of Internet interfaces in and outside their convergences with photography, film, television, and interfaces from other visual genres such as stand-alone digital games are crucial for understanding how modern race and gender are constructed as categories and (sometimes, sometimes not) choices. The increasingly visual nature of the graphical Internet after 1995 calls for a displacement in our modes of critique from an earlier scholarly focus on textuality to those that examine the Internet's visual culture in a broader way. The extensive nineties literature that celebrated digital textuality's postmodern open-endedness and constructedness by emphasizing the interactivity offered the user, who became an active user rather than a passive consumer, tended to neglect the specifically visual in favor of developing text-based arguments.[38]

One of my intentions for this book is to broaden the field of Internet studies not only by looking at its visual as well as its textual culture but also by looking at things that are not "on" it—like the Jennifer Lopez video and other media forms that may not be created for distribution via the Internet but make reference to it and share its logic of interfaced interactivity. At any rate, this distinction is eroding at a rapid pace: the Internet's ability to transcode all forms of media means that we would do well to avoid making claims about what is "on" it—while "If You Had My Love" was originally produced and screened on MTV and other music video television stations, it exists as well in digital interactive forms like Lopez's 2000 DVD "Feelin' So Good," as a streaming video file on MTV.com and muchmusic.com, and as a QuickTime movie file that is easily downloaded using free file-sharing software like Kazaa, Acquisition, or Morpheus.

Interfaces inform all media—videos, television, literature—and as this happens we are witnessing the creation of new power differentials in visual capital. Internet scholars define themselves partially as people who are interested in the history and use of digital interfaces in the context of computers, but videos like "If You Had My Love" are hybrid in several ways: for one, they reference a tradition of racialized, gendered relations of looking and seeing that Internet scholars are not accustomed to thinking about outside the context of online communities of color and Web sites about gender. This type of hybrid media object requires a convergent mode of criticism and interpretation—a visual culture of the Internet.

Interfaces are an indispensable part of the media experience of both online and offline visual cultures. They are also inextricably tied to the contemporary racial project of producing volitional racial mobility in the service of new forms of capitalism. Noting their deployment in old mass-media forms like film and television redresses the focus on the remediation of old media forms by new ones that limits Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, a standard textbook on new media theory. Bolter and Grusin's method of understanding new media emphasizes tracing its roots in old media to tease out the ways that the new remediates the old. I argue for re-remediation, reading the digital in the nondigital, a method that will become increasingly necessary as media convergence challenges that distinction.

I believe that it is fruitful, if we are looking for examples of the creation of subversive and resistant forms of new media visual capital, to look at smaller-scale, more intimate uses of digital signification by audiences that may be less ambitious or less confident with computer production technology. In chapter 1, I examine the ways that AIM buddies signify ethnic, national, gender, and linguistic identity in the context of Internet youth culture. These personal icons of identity are easily obtained and customized; just a few pixels big, in many cases, they are part of the visual culture of Instant Messenger, an extremely commonly used CMC (computer-mediated communications) technology, and they signify identity in ways that are oral and enacted. This is a necessary intervention because IM is mistakenly perceived as not *having* a visual culture; it seems to be one of the last text-based communication modes on the Internet (people even call the act of sending SMS [short message service] notes on their cell phones "texting.") However, AIM buddies provide a visual frame for what seems to be a purely oral or textual mode. AIM buddies are visual signifying systems that are individually chosen by users and are maximized for appropriation; buddy-sharing sites like buddyicon.info allow amateurs to instantly recirculate their creations among the Internet public at large. AIM buddy creation is a form of vernacular engineering, to use Eglash's term: it is "the reinvention of products and rethinking of knowledge systems, often in ways that embody critique, resistance, and outright revolt."[39] Racialized and gendered AIM buddies often perform complex critiques of the notion of a raceless or neuter digital body. In addition, examining them shows us what is lost when popular Internet cultures are ignored in favor of "artistic" ones that most people will never see. The formation of digital taste cultures that are low-resolution, often full of bathroom humor, and influenced by youth-oriented and transnational visual styles like anime ought to be traced

as it develops in its native mode: the Internet. AIM buddies also function as a form of resistance to, and protest against, slick commercial and gaming avatars from licensed media franchises that may not be customizable; the case could easily be made for analyzing AIM buddies as folk art, but my focus instead will be on the ways that they function as sophisticated strategies for users to manage identities that may be multifarious and ambiguous.

In chapter 2, I examine the visual culture of online racial profiling in a Web site called www.alllooksame.com. This site gives users a quiz that asks them to determine whether photographs represent Korean, Japanese, or Chinese people, and then totes up their score. The site is a humorous one that nonetheless refers to a much more sinister practice of racial profiling based on physiognomical photographs and other images that come from anthropology, sociology, criminology, and the other social sciences. Racial profiling has a long and sordid history, especially when viewed within the context of colonial and postcolonial politics, politics that often compelled or allowed governmental functionaries to decide simply by looking whether or not an individual belonged to a specific race. The case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a landmark because it stood in opposition to what had been common practice, that is, the visual determination of race on a casual, continual, and extremely subjective basis by "untrained" individuals such as train porters, ticket takers, teachers, and so on. Alllooksame.com playfully asks its viewers to return to a prescientific age in which race is determined by visual means; this constant process of profiling is put to work to call Asian identity into question. The site's interactivity requires the user to participate in the folly of mastering racial "knowledge" by visual means.

In chapter 3, I examine science fiction films' objects of interactivity: what is the visual culture set up by the world of such films that moves into the world of the Internet and its interfaces? In *Gattaca* (1997), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999–2004), and *Minority Report* (2002), the Internet and other networking communications and imaging technologies create a culture of surveillance of the body via databased biometric technologies such as retinal printing, genetic mapping, and other types of body and racial profiling. In *Minority Report* and *The Matrix* I trace the ways that black and white interfaces are defined, and the ways that the Asian American body functions as a liminal space between the two. In my readings of these films, I make a case for the irreplaceable contributions of Internet scholars to methods of film critique—just as a knowledge and grounding of early cinema might be helpful in understanding the culture of animated GIFs (a common feature of

amateur digital signatures and homemade AIM buddies), so too might a critical base in digital interface theory and structure be indispensable to readings of films that are so mediated by computer interfaces as plot elements, sources of visual style, and the means of vision itself. Films that use digital interfaces in such central ways require a method of reading that takes their particular histories, functionalities, and visual cultures into account. Just as "seeing" in the context of media consumption today means "seeing through" the apparatus of the interface, so too does the "seeing" of race in these contexts entail "seeing through" the lens of science as a mode of bodily surveillance that defines race as a function of biometric measures and databases.

Chapter 4 describes the vibrant visual cultures that pregnant women create when they construct pregnant avatars for their signature files on Internet bulletin boards. While there has been much research about the dearth of women online and the hostile masculine culture of the early Internet, there has been little research on women's genres of Internet use in the context of pregnancy and digital production.[40] Women use pregnancy bulletin boards to become powerful self-signifying subjects of interactivity just as their status as separate beings and their claims to individual subjecthood at the turn of the century come into question. As Peggy Phelan eloquently describes, right-to-life visual rhetoric in the nineties and beyond used technologically enabled medical imaging to reinforce the notion of the fetus's individuality at the expense of the pregnant woman's.[41] Intersectional critique that would consider how differential access to digital production is conditioned by race and gender also requires that we pay attention to class, an issue partly defined in our times by privilege in relation to the Internet (i.e., high-speed, technically supported access to networked computing both at home and at work). The avatars that these women produce pose a problem for many upper- and intellectual-class viewers in that they are decidedly déclassé in terms of visual style, as is much of popular digital visual culture; they are cartoonish, "cutesy," festooned with animated sparkles, flashing animated GIFs, pastel colors, and sentimental stylings taken from older media franchises like Care Bears, Disney, Hello Kitty, and *Friends*. These women are not the idealized subjects of interactivity lauded by digital arts scholars: in some sense, they give the lie to the claim that "as with contemporary art history and visual culture in general, much of the most cutting edge work on feminism and visual culture in recent years has focused on new media: the images produced in and through new technologies of representation, often linked to the biotechnology and fertility industries, and communications fields."[42] Yet while these women's autobiographical digital

signatures are far from "cutting edge" in terms of difficulty of production or conventional aesthetic qualities, they are revolutionary in terms of the power that they take back from institutions that govern and produce particularly powerful types of visual signification, institutions like the very "biotech and fertility industries" that give rise to so many images of women's bodies, digital images that are accorded power and authority.

To possess access to the means of managing personal visual capital is crucial to establishing one's position as a digital subject rather than a digital object in the context of the Internet. In chapter 5, I discuss the consumption and production of the digital divide, and the ways that nonwhite Internet users function as objects and subjects of interactivity. My goals are to understand how power relations work in the digital visual field by looking at subject/object relations in light of access to visual capital, who chooses and is chosen, who sells and is bought, who surfs and is surfed. However, I also aim to challenge binary definitions of the so-called information gap, a term that has lately replaced the older discourse of the "digital divide," or haves and have-nots regarding Internet and digital interactivity, in the interest of enabling a more nuanced look at the modalities of access and ownership of the body and cultural property. Just as infrastructural aspects of urban space such as low freeway overpass ramps worked to differentially screen certain ethnic groups (such as African Americans from Harlem) from New York's Jones Beach while permitting others (such as Italians from Brooklyn, who more frequently owned cars), so too does the Internet work to differentially screen users by race, ethnicity, and language use. Asian Americans are part of, and subject to, a very different digital racial formation than Latinos and African Americans; in recent years, they have claimed a unique mode as objects and subjects of interactivity that exceeds their role as passive objects of representation, as in *The Matrix* films. Chapter 5 describes some of the results of race-based empirical surveys that profile an image of a nationalized Asian American as an Internet "power" user. While taking issue with this somewhat rosy view of Asian American empowerment online based on high Internet adoption figures, the chapter does look to some positive examples of racial-identity-based coalitions that have formed online, partly as a result of this characterization. Relatively large numbers of Asian American users online have led to the formation of vigorous online petition communities that exemplify the notion of a pan-Asian American body politic that protests racism, particularly in the retail sector, as in the case of the Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirt and media racism as it appeared in the *Details* magazine feature "Asian or Gay?"

Studies of older media and "active audiences," such as those by John Fiske, have stressed the ways that audiences resist media images and narratives that are transmitted to them through one-way channels, mass mediated by culture institutions, and filtered through market-driven ideologies that rarely have viewers' best interests at heart. This perspective, which optimistically envisions audiences as more savvy and empowered than had previously been believed, has since been critiqued quite strongly by media critics. Much of Fiske's work establishing this theoretical position was formulated before the popularization of the Internet, much less its increasing adoption by users of color and women. Perhaps an examination of the deployment of the Internet as a racial and gendered visual cultural practice might help us to take a closer look at the ways that cultural resistance to normative gender, racial, and national narratives might be enabled in new digitally interactive spaces. While Jennifer Lopez is probably not the first media figure that comes to mind when pondering the potential of the Internet as a space of resistant digital practice, the uneasy balance between viewer and viewed, ethnically marked and ethnically neutral, producer and produced, commodity and gift, and user and used that we can see in "If You Had My Love" posits a future in which there are no easy answers to the question of identity in the representational world of the Internet. The multilayered visual culture of the Internet is anything but a space of utopian posthumanism where differences between genders, races, and nationalities are leveled out; on the contrary, it is an intensely active, productive space of visual signification where these differences are intensified, modulated, reiterated, and challenged by former objects of interactivity, whose subjectivity is expressed by their negotiations of the shifting terrain of identity, whose seismic adjustments are partly driven by their own participations within it, the result of several major cultural shifts and a digital technology industry that both compels and confounds vision. The last few years have truly seen an explosion in racial and ethnic identity content on the Web: African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans are the fastest growing group of Web users, and as Michele Wright notes in 2005: "Four years ago, I could name all the major web sites . . . by and about black communities in North America, the Caribbean, and western Europe; nowadays I simply can't keep up."[43] Earlier studies of race in cyberspace were confounded by a scarcity of concrete examples; the opposite problem obtains today. The popularity of the Internet among a broad spectrum of users arrayed along different axes of identity has certainly not proved to be the magic democracy-enhancing bullet that earlier Internet utopians thought it might be, but it has resulted in a variety of

media practices that instantiate race in the visual images that these new subjects of interactivity choose, construct, and consume.

Object and subject are not mutually exclusive roles: it is not possible to definitively decide who is being *interacted* and who is being *interactive* except in specific instances. Individuals can experience more or less interactivity or representational power depending on what they are doing on the Internet; how, where, and how long they are doing it; and whether and how they are represented offline in relation to it. The metaphor of "parsing" might be useful here. Parsing is a term used to describe the ordering or syntactical protocol used by a computer or a programmer when implementing coded instructions in a computer language. The graphical Internet demands a type of interpretive modality that goes beyond the textual, one that replaces the notion of "reading" or even "viewing" with a transcoded model of parsing. The mode and type of iteration, the order and positioning of symbols, and the codes by which it is read determine the way that a new media object interacts with its user. When we look at any example of the Internet's popular culture, we must weigh power differentials in terms of both its overt "content" as well as its user's access to forms of revision, modification, distribution, and interaction to parse the movement of power across the multiple positions available to users of color and women on the Internet. In his work on the network society and the role of the Internet in late capitalism, Manuel Castells has documented the passion for claiming identities that has arisen along with, and has indeed been enabled by, the rise of network technologies. This book parses some of the exceedingly rich and strange visual artifacts unique to the Internet, sites that a newly diverse group of users actively employ to both express and interrogate their racial, gendered, national, and class identities.