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Chapter 18

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RACE IN/FOR CYBERSPACE
Identity tourism and racial passing on the Internet

MY STUDY, WHICH I WOULD characterize as ethnographic, with certain important reservations, focuses on the ways in which race is 'written' in the cyberspace locus called LambdaMOO, as well as the ways it is read by other players, the conditions under which it is enunciated, contested, and ultimately erased and suppressed, and the ideological implications of these performative acts of writing and reading otherness. What does the way race is written in LambdaMOO reveal about the enunciation of difference in new electronic media? Have the rules of the game changed, and if so, how?

Role-playing sites on the Internet like LambdaMOO offer their participants programming features such as the ability to physically 'set' one's gender, race and physical appearance, through which they can, indeed are required to, project a version of the self which is inherently theatrical. Since the 'real' identities of the interlocutors at Lambda are unverifiable (except by crackers and hackers, whose outlaw manipulations of code are unanimously construed by the Internet's citizens as a violation of both privacy and personal freedom) it can be said that everyone who participates is 'passing', as it is impossible to tell if a character's description matches a player's physical characteristics. Some of the uses to which this infixed theatricality are put are benign and even funny – descriptions of self as a human-size pickle or pot-bellied pig are not uncommon, and generally are received in a positive, amused, tolerant way by other players. Players who elect to describe themselves in racial terms, as Asian, African American, Latino, or other members of oppressed and marginalized minorities, are often seen as engaging in a form of hostile performance, since they introduce what many consider a real life 'divisive issue' into the phantasmatic world of cybernetic textual interaction. The borders and frontiers of cyberspace which had previously seemed so amorphous take on a keen sharpness when the enunciation of racial otherness is put into play as performance. While everyone is 'passing', some forms of racial passing are condoned and practised since they do not threaten the integrity of a national sense of self which is defined as white.

The first act a participant in LambdaMOO performs is that of writing a self description – it is the primal scene of cybernetic identity, a postmodern performance of the mirror stage:

> Identity is the first thing you create in a MUD. You have to decide the name of your alternate identity – what MUDders call your character. And you have to describe who this character is, for the benefit of the other people who inhabit the same MUD. By creating your identity, you help create a world. Your character's role and the roles of the others who play with you are part of the architecture of belief that upholds for everybody in the MUD the illusion of being a wizard in a castle or a navigator aboard a starship: the roles give people new stages on which to exercise new identities, and their new identities affirm the reality of the scenario.
>
> (Rheingold 1993)

In LambdaMOO it is required that one choose a gender; though two of the choices are variations on the theme of 'neuter', the choice cannot be deferred because the programming code requires it. It is impossible to receive authorization to create a character without making this choice. Race is not only not a required choice, it is not even on the menu.[1] Players are given as many lines of text as they like to write any sort of textual description of themselves that they want. The 'architecture of belief' which underpins social interaction in the MOO, that is, the belief that your interlocutors possess distinctive human identities which coalesce through and vivify the glowing letters scrolling down the computer screen, is itself built upon this form of fantastic autobiographical writing called the self-description. The majority of players in LambdaMOO do not mention race at all in their self-description, though most do include eye and hair colour, build, age, and the pronouns which indicate a male or a female gender.[2] In these cases when race is not mentioned as such, but hair and eye colour is, race is still being evoked – a character with blue eyes and blonde hair will be assumed to be white. Yet while the textual conditions of self-definition and self-performance would seem to permit players total freedom, within the boundaries of the written word, to describe themselves in any way they choose, this choice is actually an illusion. This is because the choice not to mention race does in fact constitute a choice – in the absence of racial description, all players are assumed to be white. This is partly due to the demographics of Internet users – most are white, male, highly educated and middle class. It is also due to the utopian belief-system prevalent in the MOO. This system, which claims that the MOO should be a free space for play, strives towards policing and regulating racial discourse in the interest of social harmony. This system of regulation does permit racial role-playing when it fits within familiar discourses of racial stereotyping, and thus perpetuates these discourses. I shall focus on the deployment of Asian performance within the MOO because Asian personae are by far the most common non-white ones chosen by players and offer the most examples for study.

The vast majority of male Asian characters deployed in the MOO fit into familiar stereotypes from popular electronic media such as video games, television and film, and popular literary genres such as science fiction and historical romance. Characters named Mr Sulu, Chun Li, Hua Ling, Anjin San, Musashi, Bruce Lee, Little Dragon, Nunchaku, Hiroko, Miura Tetsuo and Akira invoke their counterparts in the world of popular media; Mr Sulu is the token 'Oriental' in the television show *Star Trek*, Hua Ling and Hiroko are characters in the science fiction novels *Eon* and *Red Mars*, Chun Li and Liu Kang are characters from the video games *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, the movie star Bruce Lee was nicknamed 'Little Dragon', Miura Tetsuo and Anjin San are characters in James

Clavell's popular novel and mini-series *Shogun*, Musashi is a medieval Japanese folklore hero, and Akira is the title of a Japanese animated film of the genre called *anime*. The name Nunchaku refers to a weapon, as do, in a more oblique way, all of the names listed above. These names all adapt the samurai warrior fantasy to cyberdiscursive role-playing, and permit their users to perform a notion of the Oriental warrior adopted from popular media. This is an example of the crossing over effect of popular media into cyberspace, which is, as the latest comer to the array of electronic entertainment media, a bricolage of figurations and simulations. The Orientalized male persona, complete with sword, confirms the idea of the male Oriental as potent, antique, exotic and anachronistic.

This type of Orientalized theatricality is a form of identity tourism; players who choose to perform this type of racial play are almost always white, and their appropriation of stereotyped male Asiatic samurai figures allows them to indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally. Choosing these stereotypes tips their interlocutors off to the fact that they are not 'really' Asian; they are instead 'playing' in an already familiar type of performance. Thus, the Orient is brought into the discourse, but only as a token or 'type'. The idea of a non-stereotyped Asian male identity is so seldom enacted in LambdaMOO that its absence can only be read as a symptom of a suppression.

Tourism is a particularly apt metaphor to describe the activity of racial identity appropriation, or 'passing' in cyberspace. The activity of 'surfing' (an activity already associated with tourism in the mind of most Americans) the Internet not only reinforces the idea that cyberspace is not only a place where travel and mobility are featured attractions, but also figures it as a form of travel which is inherently recreational, exotic and exiting, like surfing. The choice to enact oneself as a samurai warrior in LambdaMOO constitutes a form of identity tourism which allows a player to appropriate an Asian racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life. While this might seem to offer a promising venue for non-Asian characters to see through the eyes of the Other by performing themselves as Asian through on-line textual interaction, the fact that the personae chosen are overwhelmingly Asian stereotypes blocks this possibility by reinforcing these stereotypes.

This theatrical fantasy of passing as a form of identity tourism has deep roots in colonial fiction, such as Kipling's *Kim* and T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and Sir Richard Burton's writings. The Irish orphan and spy Kim, who uses disguise to pass as Hindu, Muslim and other varieties of Indian natives, experiences the pleasures and dangers of cross-cultural performance. Said's (1987) insightful reading of the nature of Kim's adventures in cross-cultural passing contrasts the possibilities for play and pleasure for white travellers in an imperialistic world controlled by the European empire with the relatively constrained plot resolutions offered that same boy back home. 'For what one cannot do in one's own Western environment, where to try to live out the grand dream of a successful quest is only to keep coming up against one's own mediocrity and the world's corruption and degradation, one can do abroad. Isn't it possible in India to do everything, be anything, go anywhere with impunity?' (1987: 42). To practitioners of identity tourism as I have described it above, LambdaMOO represents a phantasmatic imperial space, much like Kipling's Anglo-India, which supplies a stage upon which the 'grand dream of a successful quest' can be enacted.

Since the incorporation of the computer into the white-collar workplace, the line which divides work from play has become increasingly fluid. It is difficult for employers and indeed, for employees, to always differentiate between doing 'research' on the Internet and 'playing': exchanging email, checking library catalogues, interacting with friends and colleagues through synchronous media-like 'talk' sessions, and video conferencing offer

enhanced opportunities for gossip, jokes and other distractions under the guise of work.[3] Time spent on the Internet is a hiatus from 'RL' (or real life, as it is called by most participants in virtual social spaces like LambdaMOO), and when that time is spent in a role-playing space such as Lambda, devoted only to social interaction and the creation and maintenance of a convincingly 'real' milieu modelled after an 'international community', that hiatus becomes a full-fledged vacation. The fact that Lambda offers players the ability to write their own descriptions, as well as the fact that players often utilize this programming feature to write stereotyped Asian personae for themselves, reveal that attractions lie not only in being able to 'go' to exotic spaces,[4] but to co-opt the exotic and attach it to oneself. The appropriation of racial identity becomes a form of recreation, a vacation from fixed identities and locales.

This vacation offers the satisfaction of a desire to fix the boundaries of cultural identity and exploit them for recreational purposes. As Said puts it, the tourist who passes as the marginalized Other during his travels partakes of a fantasy of social control, one which depends upon and fixes the familiar contours of racial power relations.

> It is the wish-fantasy of someone who would like to think that everything is possible, that one can go anywhere and be anything. T.E. Lawrence in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* expresses this fantasy over and over, as he reminds us how he – a blond and blue-eyed Englishman – moved among the desert Arabs as if he were one of them. I call this a fantasy because, as both Kipling and Lawrence endlessly remind us, no one – least of all actual whites and non-whites in the colonies – ever forgets that 'going native' or playing the Great Game are facts based on rock-like foundations, those of European power. Was there ever a native fooled by the blue or green-eyed Kims and Lawrences who passed among the inferior races as agent adventurers? I doubt it.
>
> (Said 1987: 44)

As Donna Haraway notes, high technologies 'promise ultimate mobility and perfect exchange – and incidentally enable tourism, that perfect practice of mobility and exchange, to emerge as one of the world's largest single industries' (1991: 168). Identity tourism in cyberspaces like LambdaMOO functions as a fascinating example of the promise of high-technology to enhance travel opportunities by redefining what constitutes travel – logging on to a phantasmatic space where one can appropriate exotic identities means that one need never cross a physical border or even leave one's armchair to go on vacation. This 'promise' of 'ultimate mobility and perfect exchange' is not, however, fulfilled for everyone in LambdaMOO. The suppression of racial discourse which does not conform to familiar stereotypes, and the enactment of notions of the Oriental which do conform to them, extends the promise of mobility and exchange only to those who wish to change their identities to fit accepted norms.

Performances of Asian female personae in LambdaMOO are doubly repressive because they enact a variety of identity tourism which cuts across the axes of gender and race, linking them in a powerful mix which brings together virtual sex, Orientalist stereotyping and performance. A listing of some of the names and descriptions chosen by players who masquerade as 'Asian' 'females' at LambdaMOO include: AsianDoll, Miss_Saigon, Bisexual_Asian_Guest, Michelle_Chang, Geisha_Guest, and Maiden_Taiwan. They describe themselves as, for example, a 'mystical Oriental beauty, drawn from the pages of a Nagel calendar', or, in the case of the Geisha_Guest, a character owned by a white American man living in Japan:

> a petite Japanese girl in her twenties. She has devoted her entire life to the perfecting of the tea ceremony and mastering the art of lovemaking. She is multi-orgasmic. She is wearing a pastel kimono, 3 under-kimonos in pink and white. She is not wearing panties, and that would not be appropriate for a geisha. She has spent her entire life in the pursuit of erotic experiences.

Now, it is commonly known that the relative dearth of women in cyberspace results in a great deal of 'computer cross-dressing', or men masquerading as women. Men who do this are generally seeking sexual interaction, or 'netsex' from other players of both genders. When the performance is doubly layered, and a user extends his identity tourism across both race and gender, it is possible to observe a double appropriation or objectification which uses the 'Oriental' as part of a sexual lure, thus exploiting and reifying through performance notions of the Asian female as submissive, docile, a sexual plaything.

The fetishization of the Asian female extends beyond LambdaMOO into other parts of the Internet. There is a Usenet newsgroup called *alt.sex.fetish.orientals* which is extremely active – it is also the only one of the infamous *alt.sex* newsgroups which overtly focuses upon race as an adjunct to sexuality.

Cyberspace is the newest incarnation of the idea of national boundaries. It is a phenomenon more abstract yet at the same time more 'real' than outer space, since millions of participants deploy and immerse themselves within it daily, while space travel has been experienced by only a few people. The term 'cyberspace' participates in a topographical trope which, as Stone (1994) points out, defines the activity of on-line interaction as a taking place within a locus, a space, a 'world' unto itself. This second 'world', like carnival, possesses constantly fluctuating boundaries, frontiers and dividing lines which separate it from both the realm of the 'real' (that which takes place off-line) and its corollary, the world of the physical body which gets projected, manipulated and performed via on-line interaction. The title of the *Time* magazine cover story for 25 July 1994, 'The Strange New World of Internet: Battles on the Frontiers of Cyberspace', is typical of the popular media's depictions of the Internet as a world unto itself with shifting frontiers and borders which are contested in the same way that national borders are. The 'battle' over borders takes place on several levels which have been well documented elsewhere, such as the battle over encryption and the conflict between the rights of the private individual to transmit and receive information freely and the rights of government to monitor potentially dangerous, subversive or obscene material which crosses state lines over telephone wires. These contests concern the distinction between public and private. It is, however, seldom acknowledged that the trope of the battle on the cyber frontier also connotes a conflict on the level of cultural self definition. If, as Chris Chesher notes, 'the frontier has been used since as a metaphor for freedom and progress, and ... space exploration, especially, in the 1950s and 1960s was often called the "new frontier"', (1995: 18), the figuration of cyberspace as the most recent representation of the frontier sets the stage for border skirmishes in the realm of cultural representations of the Other. The discourse of space travel during this period solidified the American identity by limning out the contours of a cosmic, or 'last' frontier.[5] The 'race for space', or the race to stake out a border to be defended against both the non-human (aliens) and the non-American (the Soviets) translates into an obsession with race and a fear of racial contamination, always one of the distinctive features of the imperialist project. In such films as *Alien*, the integrity and solidarity of the American body is threatened on two fronts – both the anti-human (the alien) and the passing-as-human (the cyborg) seek to gain entry and colonize Ripley's human body. Narratives which locate the source of contaminating elements within a deceitful and uncanny technologically-enabled

theatricality – the ability to pass as human – depict performance as an occupational hazard of the colonization of any space. New and futuristic technologies call into question the integrity of categories of the human since they enable the non-human to assume a human face and identity.

Recently, a character on Lambda named 'Tapu' proposed a piece of legislation to the Lambda community in the form of petition. This petition, entitled 'Hate-Crime', was intended to impose penalties upon characters who harassed other characters on the basis of race. The players' publicly posted response to this petition, which failed by a narrow margin, reveals a great deal about the particular variety of utopianism common to real-time textual on-line social interaction. The petition's detractors argued that legislation or discourse designed to prevent or penalize racist 'hate speech' were unnecessary since those offended in this way had the option to 'hide' their race by removing it from their descriptions. A character named 'Taffy' writes, 'Well, who knows my race unless I tell them? If race isn't important then why mention it? If you want to get in somebody's face with your race then perhaps you deserve a bit of flak. Either way I don't see why we need extra rules to deal with this.' 'Taffy', who signs himself 'proud to be a sort of greyish pinky color with bloches' [*sic*] recommends a strategy of both blaming the victim and suppressing race, an issue which 'isn't important' and shouldn't be mentioned because doing so gets in 'somebody's face'. The fear of the 'flak' supposedly generated by player's decisions to include race in their descriptions of self is echoed in another post to the same group by 'Nougat', who points out that 'how is someone to know what race you are a part of? If [*sic*] this bill is meant to combat comments towards people of different races, or just any comments whatsoever? Seems to me, if you include your race in your description, you are making yourself the sacrificial lamb. I don't include "caucasian" in my description, simply because I think it is unnecessary. And thusly, I don't think I've ever been called "honkey"'. Both of these posts emphasize that race is not, should not be, 'necessary' to social interaction on LambdaMOO. The punishment for introducing this extraneous and divisive issue into the MOO, which represents a vacation space, a Fantasy Island of sorts, for its users, is to become a 'sacrificial lamb'. The attraction of Fantasy Island lay in its ability to provide scenarios for the fantasies of privileged individuals. And the maintenance of this fantasy, that of a race-free society, can only occur by suppressing forbidden identity choices.

While many of the members of social on-line communities like LambdaMOO are stubbornly utopian in their attitudes towards the power dynamics and flows of information within the technologically mediated social spaces they inhabit, most of the theorists are pessimistic. Andrew Ross and Constance Penley introduce the essays in their collection *Technoculture* by asserting that 'the odds are firmly stacked against the efforts of those committed to creating technological counter-cultures' (1991: iii). Chesher concedes that 'In spite of the claims that everyone is the same in virtual worlds, access to technology and necessary skills will effectively replicate class divisions of the rest of reality in the virtual spaces' (1994: 28) and 'will tend to reinforce existing inequalities, and propagate already dominant ideologies' (ibid.: 29). Indeed, the cost of Net access does contribute towards class divisions as well as racial ones; the vast majority of the Internet's users are white and middle class. One of the dangers of identity tourism is that it takes this restriction across the axes of race/class in the 'real world' to an even more subtle and complex degree by reducing non-white identity positions to part of a costume or masquerade to be used by curious vacationers in cyberspace. Asianness is co-opted as a 'passing' fancy, an identity-prosthesis which signifies sex, the exotic, passivity when female, and anachronistic dreams of combat in its male manifestation. 'Passing' as a samurai or geisha is diverting, reversible, and a privilege mainly used by white men. The paradigm of Asian passing masquerades

on LambdaMOO itself works to suppress racial difference by setting the tone of the discourse in racist contours, which inevitably discourage 'real-life' Asian men and women from textual performance in that space, effectively driving race underground. As a result, a default 'whiteness' covers the entire social space of LambdaMOO – race is 'whited out' in the name of cybersocial hygiene.

The dream of a new technology has always contained within it the fear of total control, and the accompanying loss of individual autonomy. Perhaps the best way to subvert the hegemony of cybersocial hygiene is to use its own metaphors against itself. Racial and racist discourse in the MOO is the unique product of a machine and an ideology. Looking at discourse about race in cyberspace as a computer bug or ghost in the machine permits insight into the ways that it subverts that machine. A bug interrupts a program's regular commands and routines, causing it to behave unpredictably. 'Bugs are mistakes, or unexpected occurrences, as opposed to things that are intentional' (Aker 1987: 12). Programmers routinely debug their work because they desire complete control over the way their program functions, just as Taffy and Nougat would like to debug LambdaMOO of its 'sacrificial lambs', those who insist on introducing new expressions of race into their world. Discourse about race in cyberspace is conceptualized as a bug, something which an efficient computer user would eradicate since it contaminates their work/play. The 'unexpected occurrence' of race has the potential, by its very unexpectedness, to sabotage the ideology-machine's routines. Therefore, its articulation is critical, as is the ongoing examination of the dynamics of this articulation. As Judith Butler puts it:

> Doubtlessly crucial is the ability to wield the signs of subordinated identity in a public domain that constitutes its own homophobic and racist hegemonies through the erasure or domestication of culturally and politically constituted identities. And insofar as it is imperative that we insist upon those specificities in order to expose the fictions of an imperialist humanism that works through unmarked privilege, there remains the risk that we will make the articulation of ever more specified identities into the aim of political activism. Thus every insistence on identity must at some point lead to a taking stock of the constitutive exclusions that reconsolidate hegemonic power differentials.
>
> (1993: 118)

The erasure and domestication of Asianness on LambdaMOO perpetuates an Orientalist myth of social control and order. As Cornell West puts it, as Judith Butler puts it, 'race matters', and 'bodies matter'. Programming language and Internet connectivity have made it possible for people to interact without putting into play any bodies but the ones they write for themselves. The temporary divorce which cyberdiscourse grants the mind from the body and the text from the body also separates race and the body. Player scripts which eschew repressive versions of the Oriental in favour of critical rearticulations and recombinations of race, gender and class, and which also call the fixedness of these categories into question have the power to turn the theatricality characteristic of MOOspace into a truly innovative form of play, rather than a tired reiteration and reinstatement of old hierarchies. Role-playing is a feature of the MOO, not a bug, and it would be absurd to ask that everyone who plays within it hew literally to the 'RL' gender, race or condition of life. A diversification of the roles which get played, which are permitted to be played, can enable a thought-provoking detachment of race from the body, and an accompanying questioning of the essentialness of race as a category. Performing alternative versions of self and race jams the ideology-machine, and facilitates a desirable opening up of what Judith Butler calls 'the difficult future terrain of community' in cyberspace (1993: 242).

Notes

1. Some MUDS such as Diku and Phoenix require players to select races. These MUDS are patterned after the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons and unlike Lambda, which exists to provide a forum for social interaction and chatting, focus primarily on virtual combat and the accumulation of game points. The races available to players (orc, elf, dwarf, human, etc.) are familiar to readers of the 'sword and sorcery' genre of science fiction, and determine what sort of combat 'attributes' a player can exploit. The combat metaphor which is a part of this genre of role-playing reinforces the notion of racial difference.
2. Most players do not choose either spivak or neuter as their gender; perhaps because this type of choice is seen as a non-choice. Spivaks and neuters are often asked to 'set gender' by other players; they are seen as having deferred a choice rather than having made an unpopular one. Perhaps this is an example of the 'informatics of domination' which Haraway (1991) describes.
3. Computer users who were using their machines to play games at work realized that it was possible for their employers and co-workers to spy on them while walking nearby and notice that they were slacking – hence, they developed screen savers which, at a keystroke, can instantly cover their 'play' with a convincingly 'work-like' image, such as a spreadsheet or business letter.
4. Microsoft's recent television and print media advertising campaign markets access to both personal computing and networking by promoting these activities as a form of travel; the ads ask the prospective consumer, 'where do you want to go today?' Microsoft's promise to transport the user to new spaces where dèsire can be fulfilled is enticing in its very vagueness, offering an open-ended invitation for travel and novel experiences.
5. The political action group devoted to defending the right to free speech in cyberspace against governmental control calls itself 'The Electronic Frontier Foundation'; this is another example of the metaphorization of cyberspace as a colony to be defended against hostile takeovers.

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