

C Y B E R T Y P E S

Race, Ethnicity, and Identity
on the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

/ CYBERTYPES

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

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

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

tural categories and concepts. That is, cultural categories and concepts are substituted, on the level of meaning and/or language, by new ones which derive from the computer's ontology, epistemology, pragmatics. New media thus acts as a forerunner of this more general process of cultural re-conceptualization. (64)

If we follow this proposition, we can see that our culture is in the process of being "transcoded" by the computer's "ontology, epistemology, pragmatics." While this statement has far-reaching implications, at the least it can be seen as an argument for a new openness in new media studies toward the adoption of a terminology that at least acknowledges the indispensable nature of the computer in the study of new media. This would be a transcoded kind of terminology, one that borrows from the language of the computer itself rather than from the language of critical theory or old media studies. In his article "The Field of Humanistic Informatics and its Relation to the Humanities," Espen Aarseth argues that the study of new media needs to be a "separate, autonomous field, where the historical, aesthetic, cultural and discursive aspects of the digitalization of our society may be examined [. .]. We cannot leave this new development to existing fields, because they will always privilege their traditional methods, which are based on their own empirical objects" (n.p.).

In an attempt to transcode the language of race and racialism that I observed online, I coined the term *cybertype* to describe the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism. The study of racial cybertypes brings together the cultural layer and the computer layer; that is to say, cybertyping is the process by which computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the "cultural layer" or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace. Manovich is correct in asserting that we must take into account the ways that the computer determines how ideological constructs such as race get articulated in this new medium.

Critical theory itself is a technology or machine that produces a particular kind of discourse, and I'd like to conduct a discursive

experiment by poaching a term from nineteenth-century print technology. That term is *stereotype*.

The word *stereotype* is itself an example of machine language, albeit a precomputer machine language; the first stereotype was a mechanical device that could reproduce images relatively cheaply, quickly, and in mass quantities. Now that computer-enabled image-reproducing technology like the Internet is faster, cheaper, and more efficient than ever before, how does that machine language translate into critical terms? Might we call new formulations of machine-linked identity *cybertypes*? This is a clunky term; in hacker-speak it would be called a “kludge” or “hack” because it’s an improvised, spontaneous, seat-of-the-pants way of getting something done. (Critical theory, like the software industry, is a machine that is good at manufacturing linguistic kludges and hacks). I’d like to introduce it, however, because it acknowledges that identity online is still *typed*, still mired in oppressive roles even if the body has been left behind or bracketed.¹ I pose it as a corrective to the disturbingly utopian strain I see embodied in most commercial representations of the Internet in general. Chosen identities enabled by technology, such as online avatars, cosmetic and transgender surgery and body modifications, and other cyberprostheses are not breaking the mold of unitary identity but rather shifting identity into the realm of the “virtual,” a place not without its own laws and hierarchies. Supposedly “fluid” selves are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are “solid.”

While telecommunications and medical technologies can challenge some gender and racial stereotypes, they can produce and reflect them as well. Cybertypes of the biotechnologically enhanced or perfected woman and of the Internet’s invisible minorities, who can log on to the Net and be taken for “white,” participate in an ideology of liberation from marginalized and devalued bodies. This kind of technology’s greatest promise to us is to eradicate otherness—to create a kind of better living through chemistry, so to speak. Images of science freeing women from their aging bodies, which make it more difficult to conceive children and ward off cellulite, freeing men from the curse of hair loss, and freeing minorities online from the stigma of their race (since no one can see them), reinforce a

“postbody” ideology that reproduces the assumptions of the old one. In an example of linguistic retrofitting, I’ve termed this phenomenon an example of the “meet the new boss, same as the old boss” product line). In other words, machines that offer identity prostheses to redress the burdens of physical “handicaps” such as age, gender, and race produce cybertypes that look remarkably like racial and gender stereotypes. My research on cross-racial impersonation in an online community, described in chapter 2, reveals that when users are free to choose their own race, all were assumed to be white. And many of those who adopted nonwhite personae turned out to be white male users masquerading as exotic samurai and horny geishas.

Of course, this kind of vertiginous identity play, which produces and reveals cybertyping, is not the fault of or even primarily an effect of technology. Microsoft’s advertising slogan, “Where do you want to go today?” is another example of the discourse of technological liberation, and it situates the agency directly where it belongs: with the user. Though computer memory modules double in speed every couple of years, users are still running operating systems that reflect phantasmatic visions of race and gender. Moore’s Law, which states that computer processing speeds double every eighteen months, does not obtain in the “cultural layer.” In the end, despite academic and commercial discourses, to the contrary it does come down to bodies—bodies with or without access to the Internet, telecommunications, and computers and the cultural capital necessary to use them; bodies with or without access to basic healthcare, let alone high-tech pharmaceuticals or expensive forms of elective surgery.

Cybertypes are more than just racial stereotypes “ported” to a new medium. Because the Internet is interactive and collectively authored, cybertypes are created in a peculiarly collaborative way; they reflect the ways that machine-enabled interactivity gives rise to images of race that both stem from a common cultural logic and seek to redress anxieties about the ways that computer-enabled communication can challenge these old logics. They perform a crucial role in the signifying practice of cyberspace; they stabilize a sense of a white self and identity that is threatened by the radical fluidity and disconnect between mind and body that is celebrated in so much

cyberpunk fiction. Bodies get tricky in cyberspace; that sense of disembodiment that is both freeing and disorienting creates a profound malaise in the user that stable images of race work to fix in place.

Cybertypes are the images of race that arise when the fears, anxieties, and desires of privileged Western users (the majority of Internet users and content producers are still from the Western nations) are scripted into a textual/graphical environment that is in constant flux and revision. As Rey Chow writes in “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” images of raced others become necessary symptoms of the postcolonial condition. She writes that “the production of the native is in part the production of our postcolonial modernity” (30), and that “we see that in our fascination with the ‘authentic native’ we are actually engaged in a search for the aura even while our search processes themselves take us farther and farther from that ‘original’ point of identification” (46). The Internet is certainly a postcolonial discursive practice, originating as it does from both scientific discourses of progress and the Western global capitalistic project. When Chow attributes our need for stabilizing images of the “authentic native” to the “search for the aura,” or original and authentic object, she is transcoding Walter Benjamin’s formulation from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” into a new paradigm. In a subsection to her essay entitled “The Native in the Age of Discursive Reproduction,” Chow clarifies her use of Benjamin to talk about postcolonialism and the function of the “native.” While Benjamin maintained that technology had radically changed the nature of art by making it possible to reproduce infinite copies of it—thus devaluing the “aura” of the original—Chow envisions the “native” himself as the original, with his own aura. When natives stop acting like natives—that is to say, when they deviate from the stereotypes that have been set up to signify their identities—their “aura” is lost: they are no longer “authentic.” Thus, a rationale for the existence of racial cybertypes becomes clear: in a virtual environment like the Internet where *everything* is a copy, so to speak, and nothing has an aura since all cyberimages exist as pure pixellated information, the desire to search for an original is thwarted from the very beginning. Hence the need for images of cybertyped “real natives” to assuage that desire. Chow poses a series of questions in this section:

Why are we so fascinated with “history” and with the “native” in “modern” times? What do we gain from our labor on these “endangered authenticities” which are presumed to be from a different time and a different place? What can be said about the juxtaposition of “us” (our discourse) and “them”? What kind of *surplus value* is created by this juxtaposition? (42)

The surplus value created by this juxtaposition (between the Western user and the discourses of race and racism in cyberspace) lies precisely within the need for the native in modern times. As machine-induced speed enters our lives—the speed of transmission of images and texts, of proliferating information, of dizzying arrays of decision trees and menus—all of these symptoms of modernity create a sense of unease that is remedied by comforting and familiar images of a “history” and a “native” that seems frozen in “a different time and a different place.”

This is the paradox: In order to think rigorously, humanely, and imaginatively about virtuality and the “posthuman,” it is absolutely necessary to ground critique in the lived realities of the human, in all their particularity and specificity. The nuanced realities of virtuality—racial, gendered, othered—live in the body, and though science is producing and encouraging different readings and revisions of the body, it is premature to throw it away just yet, particularly since so much postcolonial, political, and feminist critique stems from it.

The vexed position of women’s bodies and raced bodies in feminist and postcolonial theory has been a subject of intense debate for at least the past twenty years. While feminism and postcolonial studies must, to some extent, buy into the notion of there being such a thing as a “woman” or a “person of color” in order to be coherent, there are also ways in which “essentialism is a trap,” (89) to quote Gayatri Spivak. Since definitions of what counts as a woman or a person of color can be shifting and contingent upon hegemonic forces, essentialism can prove to be untenable. Indeed, modern body technologies are partly responsible for this: gender reassignment surgery and cosmetic surgery can make these definitions all the blurrier. In addition, attributing essential qualities to women and people of color can reproduce a kind of totalizing of identity

that reproduces the old sexist and racist ideologies. However Donna Haraway, who radically questions the critical gains to be gotten from conceptualizing *woman* as anchored to the body, take great pains to emphasize that she does not “know of any time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of ‘race,’ ‘gender,’ ‘sexuality,’ and ‘class’” (157). Though she replaces the formerly essential concept of “woman” with that of the “cyborg,” a hybrid of machine and human, she also acknowledges that feminist politics must continue “through coalition—affinity, not identity” (155). Both she and Spivak write extensively about the kinds of strategic affinities that can and must be built between and among “women” (albeit in quotation marks), racial and other minorities, and other marginalized and oppressed groups.

Is it a coincidence that just as feminist and subaltern politics—built around affinities as well as identities—are acquiring some legitimacy and power in the academy (note the increasing numbers of courses labeled “multicultural,” “ethnic,” “feminist,” “postcolonial” in university course schedules) MCI Worldcom, and other teletechnology corporations are staking out their positions as forces that will free us from race and gender? Barbara Christian, in her 1989 essay “‘The Race for Theory’: Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism,” sees a similar kind of “coincidence” in regard to the increasing dominance of literary theory as a required and validating activity for American academics. She asserts that the technology of literary theory was made deliberately mystifying and dense to exclude minority participation; this exclusionary language “surfaces interestingly enough, just when the literature of peoples of color, of black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans, began to move ‘to the center’” (278). The user-unfriendly language of literary theory, with its poorly designed interfaces, overly elaborate systems, and other difficulties of access happened to arise during the historical moment in which the most vital and vibrant literary work was being produced by formerly “peripheral” minority writers.

Perhaps I am like Christian, who calls herself “slightly paranoid” in this essay (it has been well documented that telecommunications technologies encourage paranoia), but I too wonder whether cyberspace’s claims to free us from our limiting bodies are not to

well timed. Learning curves for Net literacy are notoriously high; those of us who maintain listservs and websites and multi-user domains (MUDs) learn that to our rue. Indeed, it took me a few years of consistent effort, some expensive equipment, and much expert assistance to feel anything less than utterly clueless in cyberspace. Rhetorics that claim to remedy and erase gender and racial injustices and imbalances through expensive and difficult-to-learn technologies such as the Internet entirely gloss over this question of access, which seems to me *the* important question. And it seems unlikely that this glossing over is entirely innocent. Cybertyping and other epiphenomena of high technologies in the age of the Internet are partly the result of people of color's restricted access to the means of production—in this case, the means of production of the “fluid identities” celebrated by so much theory and commerce today.

Increasing numbers of racial minorities and women are acquiring access to the Internet—a hopeful sign indeed. Ideally, this equalizing of access to the dominant form of information technology in our time might result in a more diverse cyberspace, one that doesn't seek to elide or ignore difference as an outmoded souvenir of the body. Indeed, sites such as ivillage.com, Oxygen.com, Salon.com's Hip Mama webpages, and NetNoir, which contain content specifically geared to women and to African Americans, indicate a shift in the Internet's content that reflects a partial bridging of the digital divide. As women of color acquire an increasing presence online, their particular interests, which spring directly from gender and racial identifications (that is to say, those identities associated with a physical body offline), are being addressed.

Unfortunately, as can be seen from the high, and ultimately dashed, feminist hopes that new media such as the Oxygen Network would express women's concerns in a politically progressive and meaningful way, gender and race can just as easily be co-opted by the e-marketplace. Commercial sites such as these tend to view women and minorities primarily as potential markets for advertisers and merchants rather than as “coalitions.” Opportunities for political coalition building between women and people of color are often subverted in favor of e-marketing and commerce. (NetNoir is a notable exception to this trend. It is also the oldest of these identitarian websites, and thus was able to form its mission, content, and

“look and feel” prior to the gold rush of dot-com commerce that brought an influx of investment capital, and consequent pressure to conform to corporate interests, to the web).² Nonetheless, this shift in content which specifically addresses women and minorities, either as markets or as political entities,³ does acknowledge that body-related identities such as race and gender are not yet as fluid and thus disposable as much cybertheory and commercial discourse would like to see them.

However, such is the stubborn power of cybertyping that even when substantial numbers of racial minorities do have the necessary computer hardware and Internet access to deploy themselves “fluidly” online they are often rudely yanked back to the realities of racial discrimination and prejudice. For example, on March 13 2000, in what was called “the first civil rights class action litigation against an Internet company,” the Washington-based Equal Rights Center and two African-American plaintiffs sued Kozmo.com for racial “redlining” because of what was perceived as geographic discrimination (Katz n.p.). Kozmo.com, an online service that delivers convenience foods and products, claims to deliver only to “zip codes that have the highest rates of Internet penetration and usage” (Hamilton n.p.); however, the company’s judgment of what constitutes an Internet-penetrated zip code follows racial lines as well. African-American Washingtonians James Warren and Winona Lake used their Internet access to order goods from Kozmo, only to be told that their zip codes weren’t served by the company. Kozmo.com also refused to deliver to a neighborhood of Washington, D.C., occupied primarily by upper-class African Americans with equal “Internet penetration” as white neighborhoods (Prakash n.p.).⁴ It seems that these African-American Internet users possessed identities online that were too firmly moored to their raced bodies to participate in the utopian ideal of the Internet as a democratizing disembodied space. Unfortunately, it would appear that online identities can never be truly fluid if one lives in the “wrong” zip code.

As the Kozmo.com example shows, actual hardware access is a necessary but not sufficient component of online citizenship. All of the things that citizenship implies—freedom to participate in community on an equal basis, access to national and local infrastructures, the ability to engage in discourse and commerce (cyber- and

otherwise) with other citizens—are abrogated by racist politics disguised as corporate market research. This example of online redlining, or “refusing to sell something to someone due to age, race or location” puts a new spin on cybertyping. Rather than being left behind, bracketed, or “radically questioned” the body—the raced, gendered, classed body—gets “outed” in cyberspace just as soon as commerce and discourse come into play. Fluid identities aren’t much use to those whose problems exist strictly (or even mostly) in the real world if they lose all their currency in the realm of the real.

It is common to see terms such as “body,” “woman,” and “race” in quotation marks in much academic writing today. The (after)images of identity that the Internet shows us similarly attempt to bracket off the gendered and raced body in the name of creating a democratic utopia in cyberspace. However, postmortems pronounced over “the body” are premature, as the Kozmo.com lawsuit shows. My hope is that these discourses of cyber-enabled fluidity and liberation do not grow so insular and self-absorbed as to forget this.

In the mechanical age, technology was viewed as instrumental, as a means to an end; users were figured as already-formed subjects who approach it, rather than contingent subjects who are approached and altered by it. However, this view has been radically challenged in recent years, in particular by the Internet and other telecommunications technologies, which claim to eradicate the notion of physical distance and firm boundaries not only between users and their bodies but between topoi of identity as well.

The Internet generates both images of identity and afterimages. The word *afterimage* implies two things to me in the context of contemporary technoscience and cyberscience.

The first is its a rhetorical position as a “Y2Kism,” part of the millennial drive to categorize social and cultural phenomena as *post-*, as *after*. It puts pressure on the formerly solid and anchoring notion of identity as something we in the digital age are fast on our way to becoming “after.” This notion of the posthuman has evolved in other critical discourses of technology and the body, and is often presented in a celebratory way.⁵

The second is this: the image that you see when you close your eyes after gazing at a bright light: the phantasmatic spectacle or

private image gallery that bears but a tenuous relationship to “reality.” Cyberspace and the images of identity that it produces can be seen as an interior, mind’s-eye projection of the “real.” I’m thinking especially of screen fatigue—the crawling characters or flickering squiggles you see inside your eyelids after a lot of screen-time in front of a television, cathode ray tube (CRT) terminal, moving screen, or any of the sources of virtual light to which we are exposed every day. How have the blinding changes and dazzlingly rapid developments of technology in recent years served to project an altered image or projection of identity upon our collective consciousness? This visual metaphor of the afterimage describes a particular kind of historically and culturally grounded seeing called misseeing, and this is important. Ideally, it has a critical valence and can represent a way of seeing differently, of claiming the right to possess agency in our ways of seeing—of being a subject rather than an object of technology. In the bright light of contemporary technology, identity is revealed to be phantasmatic, a projection of culture and ideology. It is the product of a reflection or a deflection of prior images, as opposed to afterimages, of identity. When we look at these rhetorics and images of cyberspace we are seeing an afterimage—both posthuman and projectionary—that is the product of a vision rearranged and deranged by the virtual light of virtual things and people.

Similarly, the sign-systems associated with advertisements for reproductive and “gendered” technologies reveal, in Valerie Harnouï’s words, “the fierce and frantic iteration of conventional meanings and identities in the context of technologies and techniques that render them virtually unintelligible” (51). According to this logic, stable images of identity have been replaced by afterimages. When we look at cyberspace, we see a phantasm that says more about our fantasies and structures of desire than it does about the “reality” to which it is compared by the term *virtual reality*. Many of cyberspace’s commercial discourses, such as the television and print advertisements I examine in closer detail in chapter 4, work on a semiotic level that establishes a sense of a national self. However, in a radically disruptive move they simultaneously deconstruct the notion of a corporeal self anchored in familiar categories of identity. Indeed, this example of “screen fatigue” (commercial

are great examples of screen fatigue because they're so fatiguing) projects a very particular kind of afterimage of identity.

The discourse of many commercials for the Internet includes gender as only one of a series of outmoded "body categories" like race and age. The ungendered, deracinated self promised to us by these commercials is freed of these troublesome categories, which have been done away with in the name of a "progressive" politics. The goal of "honoring diversity" seen on so many bumper stickers will be accomplished by eliminating diversity.

It's not just commercials that are making these postidentitarian claims. Indeed, one could say that they're following the lead or at least running in tandem with some of the growing numbers of academics who devote themselves to the cultural study of technology. For example, in *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle writes,

When identity was defined as unitary and solid it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows for a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others') inconsistent personae—perhaps with humor, perhaps with irony. We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit. (261)

According to this way of thinking, regulatory and oppressive social norms such as racism and sexism are linked to users' "unitary and solid" identities offscreen. Supposedly, leaving the body behind in the service of gaining more "fluid identities" means acquiring the ability to carve out new, less oppressive norms, and gaining the capacity to "acknowledge diversity" in ever more effective ways. However, is this really happening in cyberspace?

I answer this question with an emphatic no in chapter 2. I have coined the term *identity tourism* to describe a disturbing thing that I was noticing in an Internet chat community. During my fieldwork I discovered that the afterimages of identity that users were creating by adopting personae other than their own online as often as not participated in stereotyped notions of gender and race. Rather than "honoring diversity," their performances online used race and gen-

der as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without “real life” consequences. Like tourists who become convinced that their travel have shown them real “native” life, these identity tourists often tool their virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatar as a kind of lived truth. Not only does this practice provide titillation and a bit of spice: as bell hooks writes, “one desires a ‘bit of the Other’ to enhance the blank landscape of whiteness” (29), it also provides a new theater in cyberspace for “eating the Other.” For hooks, “the overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (39). Certainly, the performances of identity tourists exemplify the consumption and commodification of racial difference; the fact that so many users are willing to pay monthly service fees to put their racially stereotyped avatars in chat rooms attests to this.

REMASTERING THE INTERNET

The racial stereotype, a distinctive and ongoing feature of media generally, can be envisioned in archaeological terms. If we conceive of multimedia, in particular what’s been termed the “new media” engendered by the Internet, as possessing strata—layers of accretions and amplifications of imageries and taxonomies of identity—then it is possible (and indeed, for reasons I will show shortly *strategic*) to examine the structure of these layerings. Old media provide the foundation for the new, and their means of putting race to work in the service of particular ideologies is reinvoked, with a twist, in the new landscape of race in the digital age. Visions of a “postracial democracy” evident in much discourse surrounding the Internet (particularly in print and television advertisements), are symptomatic of the desire for a cosmetic cosmopolitanism that works to conceal the problem of racism in the American context.

I could put this another way: Where’s the multi(culturalism) in multimedia? or Where is race in new media? What is the “work” that race does in cyberspace, our most currently privileged example of the technology of digital reproduction? What boundaries does it police? What “modes of digital identification” or disidentification are enabled, permitted, foreclosed vis-à-vis race? Has the notion o

the “authentic” been destroyed permanently, a process that Benjamin predicted had begun at the turn of the century with the advent of new means of mechanical reproduction of images? How do we begin to understand the place of authenticity, in particular racial and cultural authenticity, in the landscape of new media? Digital reproduction produces new iterations of race and racism, iterations with roots in those produced by mechanical reproduction. Images of race from older media are the analog signal that the Internet optimizes for digital reproduction and transmission.

On the one hand, Internet use can be seen as part of the complex of multimedia globalization, a foisting of a Western (as yet) cultural practice upon “third world,” minority, and marginalized populations. Recent protests in the Western world against the International Monetary Fund critique global capitalism and globalization as not only economically exploitative of the “third world,” but also culturally exploitative as well, essentially creating a “monoculture of the mind.”

A recent full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* (June 19, 2000) uses the term *megatechnology* and superimposes it with an image of a television being carried on an African woman’s head. (see fig. 1.1.) The ad copy reads, “Ours is the first culture in history to have moved inside media—to have largely replaced direct contact with people and nature for simulated versions on TV, sponsored by corporations. Now it’s happening globally, with grave effects on cultural diversity and democracy.” This advertisement, produced for the Turning Point Project, a coalition of more than eighty nonprofit organizations including Adbusters, the Media Alliance, the International Center for Technology Assessment, and the International Forum on Globalization, includes AOL Time Warner among the “biggest three global media giants” and explains that cultural diversity cannot survive virtual reality, of which television is cited as the “earliest form.”

It claims that global media, including (especially) the Internet, produce a kind of “mental retraining; the cloning of all cultures to be alike.” The positioning of this advertisement in a mainstream mass-media publication could seem to a cynical reader an exercise in bad faith, since the *New York Times* is itself a part of the global media complex the ad is critiquing. Nonetheless, the situatedness of

this argument within a nonacademic publication demonstrates that concerns about “virtual reality” or cyberspace as a culturally imperialistic practice exist outside of the academy as well as inside.

Monocultures are posed here as the opposite of diversity. Ziauddin Sardar characterizes cyberspace itself as a monoculture, the West’s “dark side” and thus a powerful continuation of the imperialist project. The discourse of agribusiness and the bioengineering of crops is central here: monocultures are economies of scale, an erasure of diversity under current attack by the fashionable as offering little resistance to disease. But where does the hybrid, specifically the “hyphenated” American of color, stand in relation to this?

In this ad, the image of the African woman in native dress walking a dusty road with a television balanced skillfully on her head is meant to be jarring, to operate as part of the argument against globalization, and against television watching in native cultures. Viewers are supposed to react with horror at the evil box contaminating her culture and the landscape. Yet, ought we (or do we) experience a similar horror when seeing a Filipino youth in Monterey Park, Los Angeles, carrying a boom box, break dancing, or eating a McDonald’s hamburger? Or when we see a Chinese rock group performing in Britney Spears-type outfits? In the first example, vegetarians may well take offense, but the fact is that such sights are common, and are examples of what could be seen as resistant practices.

In the example with the African woman, the tourist gaze would like to see her outside of time, protected from the incursions of digital “culture” (or monoculture) by Western intervention: the authenticity of the timeless primitive is threatened by the television set. In the second example, cultural appropriations and borrowings are commonly celebrated as hybridity and assimilation. In the culture of popular music, the productive samplings, mixings, and remasterings of hip-hop are envisioned as vital signs of a flourishing youth culture. The technologies of contemporary music create a space for these cultural mixings, scratchings, and bricolage.

How do these paradigms from music fit the Internet? Does the Internet indeed create a monoculture? Is there space within it for the subaltern to speak? How do representations of the subaltern in reference to the Internet preserve or deny diversity? How is the

paradigm of tourism invoked to stabilize threatened ideas of the authentic native post-Internet?

The Internet has a global sweep, a hype (hysteria?) attached to it; it makes distinctive claims to a radical postracial democracy that other media have failed to employ effectively. Racial cybertyping is at work on the Internet today, and its implications both *for* its “objects” and for the cultural matrix it is embedded in generally are far-reaching. Groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, who are prior to being stereotyped in older media, are now being “remastered” to use more digital terminology, ported to cybertyping. Remastering is the practice of converting an analog signal—for instance, from vinyl record, to a digital one like a digital video disc (DVD), or compact disk (CD), or to hypertext markup language (HTML)—preserves the “content” of the original piece while optimizing it for new format. Remastering fiddles with sound levels and timbre, erases scratchy silences, smoothes roughnesses, and alters signal-to-noise ratios in such a way that the same song is made infinite available for reproduction, replay, and retransmission. But with difference: variations in tone, timbre, and nuance are detectable while the song remains the same, some of its qualities are altered, and the possibilities for different audiences, different occasions for capture, replay, and transmission. The weblike media complex images of the racialized other as primitive, exotic, irremediably different, and fixed in time is an old song, one that the Internet has remastered or retrofit in digitally reproducible ways. I wish to get back in the studio, so to speak, and to see how this remastering happens and what its effects are upon social formations and readings of race in the age of digital reproduction. When you feed racism into the machine, what you get are images of “exotic” non-American racial minorities (but not American minorities) using technology.

The Internet is the fastest, most effective image-reproductive machine this world has yet seen. Just as the stereotype machine was that clumsy mechanical device that produced multiple but imperfect copies of an original image, has been replaced by more efficient and clearer, cleaner modes of image reproduction, so too are racial stereotypes being replaced by cybertypes. While racial stereotypes can now be perceived by our ever more discerning eyes as crude and obvious, and have thus have been appropriated as camp (as

Bill Cosby's collection of racist black memorabilia), or parody (black humor, like Chris Rock's, turns upon this) or incorporated into a history of oppression, cybertypes have as yet managed to sneak under the radar of critical and popular scrutiny.⁶ The digital images of natives, others, and the "raced" that proliferate on and around the Internet are clean, nonmechanical, and carried upon a beam of fiber-optic light. Cybertyping's phantom track can be traced in a Cisco television advertisement, produced as part of a series entitled "The Internet Generation" that participates in a subtle blend of racism and racialism. Rather than stereotyping different races, it cybertypes them. The children in the first ad, "Out of the Mouths of Babes," repeat statistics about the Internet's improvements about older media (i.e., "The Web has [*sic*] more users in the first five years than television did in the first thirty") in distinctively accented voices while they are depicted in "native" dress in "native" settings, such as a temple pool, a mosque, and a rural school-yard. In addition, their dialogue is fractured, as each sentence is continued or repeated by a different child in a different locale. Thus, the ad tries to literalize the smaller world that Benjamin predicted audiences accustomed to proliferating mechanical images, and, by extension, digital images, would come to desire and expect. One child tells us that "a population the size of the United Kingdom joins the Internet every six months. Internet traffic doubles every one hundred days."⁷ This depiction of the Internet as a population one joins, rather than a service one purchases and consumes or a practice one engages in, significantly uses the ur-imperial nation, the United Kingdom, as the yardstick of measurement here. This language of a "united kingdom" of multiracial "generations" seems utopian, yet polices the racial and ethnic boundaries of this world very clearly. Global capitalism is envisioned as a United Nations of users from different countries united in their praise of the Internet, yet still preserved in their different ethnic dress, languages, and "look and feel."⁷ Despite the fact that international Internet users are likely to be city dwellers, these ads depict them in picturesque and idealized "native" practices uncommon even in rural areas.

Cybertyping's purpose is to representatively bracket off racial difference, to assuage fears that the Internet is indeed producing a monoculture. The greater fear, however, which cybertyping actively

works to conceal, is the West's reluctance to acknowledge its colonization of global media, and ongoing racist practices within own borders. The ad's claims that "soon, all of our ideas will be free of borders" tries to stake out the notion that America's responsibility for its own problems with race, the greatest problem of our nation in W. E. B. Du Bois's terms, will be erased when "borders" (between nations, between the mind and the raced body) are figurative erased. The subtlety of this argument is necessary in our postcolonial, postmodern age: scenarios that invoke the scramble for Africa an emblematic episode of the West's division and exploitation of the non-Western world, just will not "play" anymore. However, porting the imperialist impulse to a commercial like Cisco's "Generations" series, which cybertypes race as useful rather than divisive sneaks under the surveillance cameras.

This commercial remasters race. Remastering implies subjugation, the recolonization of otherness in a "postcolonial" world, and its method rests upon the ideological rock of cultural "authenticity." On the contrary, rather than destroying authenticity, cybertyping wants to preserve it. Just as intellectuals in ethnic studies and women's studies are starting to radically question the efficacy of "authenticity" as a flag to rally around, a way to gain solidarity, the commercial discourse of the Internet (that is, the way it figures itself *to itself*) scrambles to pick up that dropped flag.

The Internet must contain images of authentic natives in the service of militating against particular images of cultural hybridity. The Internet functions as a tourism machine; it reproduces digital images of race as other. Missing from this picture is any depiction of race in the American context. The vexed question of racism here and now is elided. Racism is recuperated in this ad as cosmetic multiculturalism, or cosmetic cosmopolitanism. In this ad and others like it, American minorities are discursively fixed, or cybertyped, in particular ways to stabilize a sense of a cosmopolitan, digerati privileged self, which is white and Western.

POSTRACIAL COSMOPOLITANISM

In "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberspace," Kalí Tal writes that "in cyberspace, it is

possible to completely and utterly disappear people of color,” and that the elision of questions of race in cyberspace has led to its “whitening” (n.p.). On the contrary, race is far from elided in these narratives; instead it is repurposed and remastered, made to do new work. The following passage by James Fallows, taken from “The New Poor,” an article written for the *New York Times Magazine*, elucidates this:

The tech establishment has solved, in a fashion, a problem that vexes the rest of America—and therefore thinks about it in a way that seems to prefigure a larger shift. The hallway traffic in any major technology firm is more racially varied than in other institutions in the country. (It is also overwhelmingly male.) But the very numerous black and brown faces belong overwhelmingly to immigrants, notably from India, rather than to members of American minority groups. The percentage of African-Americans and Latinos in professional positions in booming tech businesses is extremely low, nearing zero at many firms. (95)

[. . .]

People in the tech world inhabit what they know to be a basically post-racial meritocracy. I would sit at a lunch table in the software firm with an ethnic Chinese from Malaysia on one side of me, a man from Colombia across the table and a man born in India but reared in America next to him. This seems, to those inside it, the way the rest of the world should work, and makes the entrenched racial problems of black-and-white American seem like some Balkan rivalry one is grateful to know is on the other side of the world. (95)

This article refers to the technological (and in this case Internet-driven) diaspora of brown, black, and yellow foreign high-tech workers into America’s technology industry. This contributes to a cosmetic multiculturalism, a false sense of racial equality—or post-racial cybermeritocracy—that I would term *cosmetic multiculturalism*. As Fallows notes, this cosmetic multiculturalism actively works to conceal “the entrenched racial problems of black and white America.” The presence of black and brown faces from other coun-

tries, notably Asian ones, encourages white workers to inhabit a *virtually* diverse world, one where local racial problems are shuffle aside by a *global* and diasporic diversity created by talented immigrants as opposed to “hyphenated Americans.” This is a form of tourism, benefiting from difference in order to make the American/Western self feel well-rounded, cosmopolitan, *postracial*. This is not digital identification, but digital *disidentification*—disavowal of the recognition of race in local contexts in favor of comfortable distant global ones. In the new landscape of cyberspace, other countries (i.e., markets, and sources of cheap expert immigrant labor in information fields) exist, but not American minorities. It only seems commonsensical, as Reed Koch, a manager at Microsoft, put it, that “if you go ten years [in the high-tech corporate world] and extremely rarely in your daily life ever encounter an American black person, I think they disappear from your awareness” (Fallow 95). One of the symptoms of cybertyping is this convenient “disappearance from awareness” of American racial minorities, a symptom that “multiculturalist” Internet advertising and the discourses of technology work hard to produce.

CYBERTYPING AND THE AMERICAN SCENE

In Vijay Prashad’s important work *The Karma of Brown Folk*, he poses a question to Asian readers: “How does it feel to be the solution?” In this volume, Prashad invokes Du Bois’s rhetorical question to African Americans—“How does it feel to be a problem?”—and repurposes it in order to trace the construction of the Asian, in particular the South Asian, as a model minority. The figure of the Asian as model worker is inextricably tied to this stereotype, which has been reiterated as a particular cyertype of the Asian as an exemplary information worker. If one sees race as a major “problem” of American digital culture, an examination of these cybertypes reveals the ways in which Asians prove to be the “solution.” Different minorities have different functions in the cultural landscape of digital technologies. They are good for different kinds of ideological work. And, in fact, this taxonomy of work and identity has been remastered: seeing Asians as the solution and black as the problem is and has always been a drastic and damaging for

mulation which pits minorities against each other and is evident in the culture at large.

On the contrary, in a fascinating twist, cybertyping figures both Asians and blacks as the solution, but for different problems. While Asians are constructed as anonymous workers, an undifferentiated pool of skilled (and grateful) labor, African Americans serve as a semiotic marker for the “real,” the vanishing point of cyberspace in particular and technology in general.⁸

THE NEW NEW THING: HEAD-HUNTING THE SOUTH ASIAN CYBORG

The issue of the *New York Times Magazine* that contains Michael Lewis’s article “The Search Engine” features a cover graphic that repeats the words “The New New Thing” hundreds of times. The subtitle is “How Jim Clark taught America what the technoeconomy was all about.” Clark, the founder of Netscape, Silicon Graphics, and Healtheon is described as “not so much an Internet entrepreneur as the embodiment of a new kind of economic man.” This article reveals that the “new kind of economic man,” specifically an American man, attains preeminence partly by his ability to repurpose the discourse of racism, to create new cybertypes of Asian technology workers, in ways which at first seem unobjectionable because they have become so common.

Clark spent a great deal of energy recruiting Indian engineers from Silicon Graphics (like engineer Pavan Nigam) to work for his new start-up Healtheon. As Lewis writes, “Jim Clark [of Netscape] had a thing for Indians. ‘The Indian outcasts of Silicon Valley,’ he usually called them, ‘my Indian hordes’ in less sober moments. ‘As a concentrated group,’ he said, ‘they were the most talented engineers in the valley . . . And they work their butts off’” (Lewis 82).

These “less sober moments” reveal cybertyping in action. This idea of Indians as constituting a horde devoid of individuality, a faceless mob, reveals both a fear of their numbers and a desire to become the head of the horde, their leader.⁹ These “Indian outcasts” are seen as a natural resource to be exploited—valuable workers, like Chinese railroad laborers. What’s more, they’re a racial group characterized “naturally” as always-already digital,

like Asians as a whole. In 1997, Bill Gates indulged in a moment of foot-in-mouth cybertyping when he declared during a visit to India that “South Indians are the second-smartest people on the planet (for those who are guessing, he rated the Chinese as the smartest); those who continue to guess should note that white people, like Gates, do not get classified, since it is the white gaze, in this incarnation, that is transcendental and able to do the classifying!)” (Prashad 70). Asian technology workers are thought not to need a “personal life,” just like Chinese railroad workers were thought to have nerves farther away from the skin. This characterization of Asians as being superior workers because of inherent, near-physiological differences, seeing them as impervious to pain, in their butt or elsewhere, places them squarely in a new, digital “different caste”: the outcasts of Silicon Valley. This term repurposes the old language of caste, an ancient system that preserves hierarchical distributions of privilege and oppression, for use in the digital age. Keeping to this logic, no amount of work can make them a part of the digital economy as “entrepreneurs” or “new economic men” they are figured as permanent outcasts and outsiders.¹⁰ Yet, such is the power of cybertyping that Clark’s and Gates’s comments are now viewed as racist but as strategic, a canny recognition of the rightfulness of race in the digital age: this is what makes Clark the “new economic man.”

As Lisa Lowe writes, “stereotypes that construct Asians as the threatening ‘yellow peril,’ or alternatively, that pose Asians as the domesticated ‘model minority,’ are each equally indicative of the national anxieties” (18). Clark’s figuration of South Indian engineers, his “thing,” cybertypes them as simultaneously, rather than alternatively, the threatening horde *and* the model minority: both threatening as a quasi-conspiratorial “concentrated group” and enticing because of their engineering talents. This cybertype of the South Asian seeks to fix the “unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant—geographically, linguistically, and racially at odds with the context of the ‘national’—that has given rise to the necessity of endlessly fixing and repeating such stereotypes” (Lowe 19).

Indeed, the discourse of Internet technology has a “thing” for Asians. In the article noted above, Jim Clark describes himself as a *headhunter*, and the term is appropriate in at least two senses of the

word. A headhunter, in the language of the cultural digerati, is an entrepreneur who locates professional “talent” and lures it away from one job to another. Much of the tension in this story has to do with Clark’s quest to acquire Asian engineers he’d previously worked with for his new venture. A high-tech headhunter facilitates the flow of human capital and labor, often across national borders.¹¹ The term has roots in colonial discourse: a headhunter is a mythologized figure, like the cannibal, constructed by colonists to embody their notions of the native as savage, a creature so uncivilized and unredeemable that he cannot be broken of his habit of collecting humans as if they were trophies; thus he must be exterminated or civilized. The figure of the headhunter was a justification for colonization. Envisioning South Asians as if they were trophies, outcasts, or hordes, having a “thing for Indians,” is a form of cybertyping; it homogenizes South Asians as a group in such a way that they constitute both the familiar model-minority paradigm as well as a resource for global capital. And what’s more, cybertyping permits this kind of speech, even allows it to signify as “cool,” or “new” in a way that Jimmy “the Greek” Synodinos’s better-intentioned comments about the superiority of black athletes could not be.

As Lewis writes, “By 1996 nearly half of the 55,000 temporary visas issued by the United States government to high-tech workers went to Indians. The definitive smell inside a Silicon Valley start-up was of curry” (82). This insistence upon the smell of curry in the context of global commerce and capitalism works to discursively fix Asians as irredeemably foreign in order to stabilize a sense of a national self. This smell, here invoked as a stereotyped sign of South Asian identity, is figured as a benefit of sorts to white workers, a kind of virtual tourism: they need never leave their start-up offices (a frowned-upon practice in any event) yet can conveniently enjoy the exotic cuisine and odors of “another” world and culture.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, cultural digerati live lives composed of these “less sober moments”; culturally and economically, Americans are living in intoxicating times, a gold rush of sorts. The fever of acquisition, creation, and entrepreneurship engendered by dot-com culture licenses specific forms of racism, if not overt racism, that are no more descriptive of the lived realities of Asian immigrants or Asian Americans than earlier colonialist or

racist ways of speaking were. Just as the gold rush depended on the exploited labor of Chinese immigrants, black slaves, and Mexican workers and consequently created racial stereotypes to justify and explain their exploitation as “Western expansion,” so too do our current digital gold rush create mythologies of race that are nostalgic. That is, they hark back to earlier narratives of race and racialism which were always-already “virtual” in the sense that they too were constructed narratives, the product of representational labor and work. As Susan Stewart defines nostalgia, it is “sadness without an object.” Nostalgia is “always ideological: what it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence is always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself in felt lack” (23). The construction of postracial utopias enabled by the Internet, and so prominently troped in television advertising on the Internet, seeks to fill that “lack” by supplying us with new narratives of race that affirm its solidity in the face of global cultural multiracialism, and new patterns of migration. Cybertyping keeps race “real” using the discourse of the virtual. The object of digital nostalgia is precisely the idea of race itself. As Renato Rosaldo defines it, nostalgia is “often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed,” and is “a process of yearning for what one has destroyed that is a form of mystification” (quoted in hooks 25). Cybertyping works to reinforce the vision of the authentic raced “native” that, first, never existed except as part of an imperialist set of narratives, and second, is already gone, or “destroyed” by technologies such as the Internet.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN DIGITAL DIVIDES: BAMBOOZLED BY THE MYTH OF ACCESS

The year 2000 was a banner year, for “Web use became balanced between sexes for the first time year with 31.1 million men and 30.2 million women online in April, according to Media Metrix. ‘some months this year [. . .] female users have significantly outnumbered their male counterparts’ (Austen D7). The digital divide between the genders is shrinking, which is not to say that there is no gender cybertyping occurring online. (This contradicts prior predictions from the early and mid-1990s that a masculinist web would

repel women from logging on: on the contrary, as in television, sexism didn't repel women from the medium). The hegemony of the web is still emphatically male. However, the article from which these statistics come, entitled "Studies Reveal a Rush of Older Women to the Web," also notes that "lost in the rush to use the Web, however, are the nation's poor."

While the article provides graphs and statistics to track web use by gender, nationality, income, and whether users log on from home or work, it neglects to mention race as a factor at any point. This elision of race in favor of gender and class is symptomatic of what Radhika Gajjala sees as the tendency of "this upwardly mobile digiterati class to celebrate a romanticized 'multiculturalism' and diversity in cyberspace" (6).

It is widely assumed that the digital divide is created by inequities in access; indeed, institutional efforts to address this divide seem solely focused on getting everyone online as quickly as possible. African Americans are cybertyped as information "have-nots," occupying the "wrong" side of the digital divide; it tropes them as the "problem." This fallacy—that access equals fair representation in terms of race and gender—can be traced by examining the ways that race has worked in other media.

No sane person would contend that once everyone has cable, television will become a truly democratic and racially diverse medium, for we can see that this has not come to pass. Mainstream film and television depicts African Americans in consistently negative ways despite extremely high usage rates of television by African Americans.¹² Hence, the dubious goal of 100 percent "penetration" of African-American communities by Internet technologies cannot, by and of itself, result in more parity or even accuracy in representations of African Americans. How does the Internet perpetuate this myth of access-as-ultimate-equalizer? Cyberspace's rhetorics make claims that are distinctively different from those of other media: its claims to "erase borders" and magically produce equality simply via access can be seen nowhere else. However, Internet usage by racial minorities is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of a meaningfully democratic Internet. As Spike Lee's brilliant film parody *Bamboozled* (2000) makes all too clear, even the presence of black writers or content producers in a popular medium such as tel-

vision fails to guarantee programming that depicts “dignified black people” if audiences are unwilling to support the show in large numbers. In *Bamboozled*, the Harvard-educated black television writer Pierre Delacroix produces the most offensive, racist, “norant” variety show he can come up with as a form of revenge against his white boss. He fully intends that the show, which depicts blacks as Topsys, Aunt Jemimas, Sambos, and Little Nigger Jim will be a resounding flop. He entitles it the *Man Tan New Millennium Minstrel Show* and requires the African American performers to appear in authentic blackface made of burnt cork. Of course, it is a major hit with the networks and the audience. This can be seen as an object lesson to people interested in the Internet’s potential as a space for activism and antiracist education: what needs to happen on the Internet to ensure that it doesn’t become the newest of the new millennium minstrel shows? The film contains a clip from Lee’s earlier film, *Malcolm X*, in which the protagonist addresses a crowd of African Americans, crying out, “You been hoodwinked and bamboozled.” Until we acquire some insight into racial cybertypes on the Internet, we are quite likely to be hoodwinked and bamboozled by the images of race we see on the Net, images that bear more relation to real people of color than minstrel shows do to dignified black people.

Due to the efforts of black activists and scholars working in older media studies, we can better see what’s at stake in this limited range of representations of racial minorities. Studies of race and the Internet are just now beginning to catch up (which is not surprising considering the familiar lag time in media criticism when it comes to critical readings of race).

We should wish Internet access for the betterment of material and educational conditions of African Americans, but ought not expect that the medium itself is going to represent them fairly without any strategies or plans put into place to encourage this direction.

POSTRACIAL DIGERATI? CYBERTYPING THE OTHER

Some studies claim that the Internet causes depression. A 1999 Carnegie Mellon University study posits that this is so because the Internet reduces the number of “strong social ties” that users main-

tain in “real life” and replaces them with “weak” or virtual ties, which don’t have the same beneficial psychological effects as face-to-face social interactions (Kraut and Lundmark 1029). The Internet’s ability to produce depression in its users (at least in me) can be traced at least in part to cybertyping, a kind of virtual social interaction that constructs people of color as “good” workers or “bad,” on the “right” or “wrong” side of the digital divide. The Internet’s claims to erase borders, such as gender, class, and racial divisions, and the ways in which public policy makers’ attentions to bridging the “digital divide” that is erroneously attributed as being the source of these problems in representation, overshadow these more subtle varieties of cybertyping. This dynamic is indeed depressing, all the more so because largely silent and undiscussed.

Radhika Gajjala writes,

Race, gender, age, sexuality, geographical location and other signifiers of “Otherness” interact with this class-based construction of “whiteness” to produce complex hierarchies and contradictions within the Digital Economy. While we can continue to call this⁴ “whiteness” because the status quo is still based upon a cultural hegemony that privileges a “white” race, it might be more appropriate to refer to this upwardly mobile subject as a “privileged hybrid transnational subject” who is a member of the “digiterati” class. (6)

Here, Gajjala posits that “privileged hybrid transnational subjects” such as Clark’s coveted South Asian programmers can be read, for all intents and purposes, as “white” since they participate in the “cultural hegemony that privileges a white race.” While they are no doubt part of that hegemony, as is every person of color who consumes, produces, and becomes the object of representation of information technologies, I contend that they are put to work in that hegemony in distinctively raced ways. The “work” that they do in this hegemony, their value-added labor in the system of information practices dubbed “global capitalism,” is this: their cybertypes work to preserve taxonomies of racial difference. The nostalgia for race, or visions of racial “authenticity” invoked by the Cisco advertisements, assuages a longing. The espoused public desire for tech-

nological uplift, in the discourse of science-fiction narratives, the desire to create a new class of “digiterati” that is in some sense postracial, is matched by a corresponding longing for “race” as a spectacle of difference, a marker to function as the horizon to the vanishing point of postmodern identities.

Contemporary debates about the digital divide tend to be divided roughly into two camps. The first of these maintains that the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde’s formulation. In other words, if people of color rush to assimilate themselves into computer culture, to bridge the digital divide, they are simply adopting the role of the docile consumer of Microsoft, Intel, and other products, and are not likely to transform the cyberspace they encounter. Like feminists who adopt the values of the patriarchy, they may succeed as isolated individuals in what has thus far been a privileged white male’s domain—technology and the Internet—but cannot bring about the kind of change that would bring about true equality. As Lorde writes, taking up the master’s tools “may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (99).

The second camp maintains that people of color can only bring about “genuine change” in the often imperialistic images of race that exist online by getting online. Envisioning cybertechnologies as less the master’s tools than tools for discourse that can take any shape is an optimistic ways of seeing things.

While it is impossible to say, definitively, which path is correct, there is no question that the digital divide is both a result of and a contributor to the practice of racial cybertyping. It is crucial that we continue to scrutinize the deployment of race online as well as the ways that Internet use can figure as a racialized practice if we are to realize the medium’s potential as a vector for social change. There is no ignoring that the Internet can and does enable new and insidious forms of racism. Whether the master’s tools present the best way to address this state of affairs has yet to be seen.