Virtual SKIN

Articulating RACE in CYBERSPACE

By **Cameron Bailey**

Does race matter? Can it sustain itself in the shifting space of virtual communities?

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

But what about cyberspace?[**] Do the same laws apply? Recent writing on electronic communication systems insist that despite its disembodied nature, cyberspace remains what Michael Benedikt calls a familiar social construct "with the ballast of materiality cast away." That means race may function in much the same way that it does in the world, where we are more directly accountable to our bodies. It may mean that, but it's hard to tell, because very few of the thinkers currently probing cyberspace have said a word about race.

Faced with the delirious prospect of leaving our bodies behind for the cool swoon of digital communication, the leading theorists of cyberspace have addressed the philosophical implications of a new technology by retreating to old ground. In a landscape of contemporary cultural criticism in which the discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality have often led to the next leap in understanding—where, in fact, they have been so thoroughly used as to be turned sometimes into mantra—these interpretive tools have come curiously late to the debate around cyberspace. It may be that the prevailing discussion of digitally-assisted subjectivity has focused not on the culture of cyberspace as it exists today, but on the potential of cyberspace, on utopian or dystopian visions for tomorrow. Since we never reveal ourselves so much as when we dream, it's worth noting that most speculations on the future of cyberspace return questions of race in particular to the margins.

But does race matter? Can it sustain itself in the shifting space of virtual communities? It would seem clear that the safety of binary oppositions—self/other, black/white, male/female, straight/gay, writer/reader—would evaporate in the forcefully uncertain world of electronic discourse. A message comes and goes without a face; communication takes place without bodies to ground it, to provide the deeper layers of meaning below the surface upon which we all depend. This is especially important given the extent to which social interaction depends on embodied communication, on stable, known genders, sexualities, races and classes being somewhere present in the communicative act. Without this there would be no power flowing through communication, and without the flow of power, what would we have to say to one another?

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

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

It's necessary to examine how variant communities are constructed online, as well as the access that different communities have to communication technology. In the United States, for instance, there is a growing movement among African Americans to resist being excluded by those corporations getting ready to wire the suburbs for the forthcoming ideology—a.k.a. information—superhighway. While this is primarily a consumer issue that only grazes deeper questions of engagement with the apparatus, there comes

with this mobilization a push for greater technological literacy among blacks and other disenfranchised people.

In personal terms, we need to explore what it means to construct identity without the aid of racial and cultural markers like physical appearance, accent, and so on. Here, I will be dealing exclusively with those forms of electronic communication that depend on text instead of any figurative representation of the physical body—i.e., Internet newsgroups, online forums, e-mail, and text-based environments such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). On the surface it would seem that these are literary domains similar to an exchange of correspondence or the letters page of a newspaper. One presents oneself in language as is done in all forms of writing, which requires all the acts of identity construction, selective editing and lying committed by anybody who has ever written anything. But online communication adds something more—speed and uncertainty. MUDs operate in close-to-real time, providing an instantaneity that remains disembodied like writing, but is nonetheless immediate like the telephone. And the literary contract between writer and readers becomes blurred. In the world of Internet newsgroups, mailing lists and electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs), writers post messages simultaneously to individuals and to groups sharing a similar interest. The question of address becomes more complex. Also, the way in which these messages are retrieved and read gives the reader a power akin to the hiphop sampler's authority over source music—it's a consumer's market. All of this uproots the online writer's sense of his or her centred self. If identity is created solely through text and the text is as fluid as this, things fall apart in interesting ways.

My entry points for exploring the special glow of virtual skin are, first, the perspective of an online browser who has been involved in local BBSs, such as the Matrix and Magic in Toronto, the CompuServe commercial networks, as well as the less-regulated Internet; and second, a continuing interest in the formation of new communities. Like all good postmodern citizens, I've learned to move with shifts in imagined communities, to ride the knowledge that, as Alluquere Rosanne Stone notes in her article, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures," "technology and culture constitute each other." I may not swim, but I've learned to surf.

My first experience of virtual community came in Rock Dundo, Barbados, 1969*, when I first jacked in to a smooth, plastic, khaki-coloured View MasterÖ. My mother, thousands of kilometres away in Canada, sent me both the machine and its software—disks that brought to life before my eyes images I had never seen before: Niagara Falls and Flowerpot Island and Toronto City Hall in stereoscopic vision. It would be two decades before I tried on a helmet, but I knew the thrill of virtual reality right then. I was transported. Every time I returned to that machine I left the postcolonial sunshine behind for the marvels of Canada. Immersed in the depth, resolution and brightness of those images I became a part of Canada, sharing an experience with every tourist who had paused to get a good look at new City Hall, who had marveled at the Falls. More importantly, by entering these images, I could share the desire for the spectacle of Canada with my mother, who had recently immigrated there.

Now, producing these words on a newer piece of fetish hardware—a matte-black IBM ThinkPad™—I can extend into corners of cyberspace, remaking myself by will and accident, reading and misreading others. It's exhilarating at first, but it's not new. As Stuart Hall and others have pointed out, migration is a central part of the postcolonial experience, and it necessarily involves shifting identity. It's the nature of Asian and African new-worlders to pass through different allegiances, belief systems and accents—for me it was Wembley, Rock Dundo and now suburban-Toronto—as a common part of life. At the same time, one develops a hyper-awareness of the relationship between physicality and identity. Like women, like lesbians and gays, people of colour[7] living in Western metropoles live a crucial part of their existence as body-people, as subjects named and identified through their flesh. One need only hear "Monkey!" or "Water-buffalo!" screamed at you on the street every once in a while to be reminded of that.

The cybersubject as currently figured is male, white, straight, able-bodied and ruling class. So what? Any identity that occupies the shadow-half of these categories (i.e., female, black, queer...) remains lashed to his or her body. Libraries of feminist thought tell us that a woman's identity has historically been defined and maintained through the body. The same holds true for Africans in the West, Aboriginal people, and so on. Biology is destiny. Physiology is law. Subjecthood lies over the horizon. This becomes especially interesting in a domain which privileges giving up the body so eagerly. That process is neither universally simple nor universally desirable.

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

Freeing up movement, communication and sensation from the limitations of the flesh might be the promise of digital experience, but the body will not be abandoned so easily. We have said that the quality of imagination is what allows all manner of disembodied experience, from being "immersed" in narrative to the spatial metaphors of cyberspace.

Shareware

So what is the nature of the online community? First, the economics of online communication require that participants have access to a computer, a modem and a telephone line. Cancel tens of millions of North Americans. Until recently, Internet access required membership in an elite institution—a university, government department or major corporation. Millions more gone, but not evenly across the board. In the United States, African Americans and Hispanics are overrepresented among those without Net access, as are Aboriginal people in Canada. Owning the means of participation is a class issue, and another example of how class is racialized in North America. In writing about poverty and information, Karen G. Schneider argues that "the information-rich, however well-meaning, have largely determined and prioritized the issues of the information revolution according to their own visions and realities." What happens when the class of the information-rich is also racialized, when it continues to be predominantly white?

Beyond economics, there is a somewhat harder to quantify culture of cyberspace. The Net nation deploys shared knowledge and language to unite against outsiders: Net jargon extends beyond technical language to acronyms both benign (BTW, "By the way") and snippy (RTFM, "Read the fucking manual"). It includes neologisms, text-graphical hybrids called emoticons, and a thoroughgoing anti-"newbie" snobbery. Like any other community, it uses language to erect barriers to membership· It's worth noting that Benedict Anderson suggests print culture is crucial to the formation of nations. The Internet is nothing if not a riot of publishing, often about itself. Popular guides such as Brendan Kehoe's *Zen and the Art of the Internet*, as well as the countless lists of "Frequently Asked Questions," serve to provide a body of common knowledge and therefore enforce order on the Net. There is in these codes of language, and in the very concept of "netiquette", something of the culture of suburban America; one gets the sense that these structures are in place not simply to order cyberspace, but to keep chaos (the urban sphere) out. It's no stretch to suggest that in the turn to cyberspace, the white middle-class men who first populated it sought refuge from the hostile forces in physical, urban space—crime, poor people, desperate neighborhoods, and the black and brown.

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

One, often overlooked, dimension of Net culture is the ludic aggression of adolescent masculinity. We have seen how cyberspace is gendered as masculine, but the community of hackers, late night Net surfers, BBS sysops and virus writers has often included large numbers of teenagers. Particularly since the era when popular culture first came to be identified with teen culture, adolescence, especially male adolescence, has been accorded profound importance and created a profound disturbance in Western society—just look at all the mechanisms in place to control it. In acts both constructive and transgressive, adolescent boys have used cyberspace to express the flux, despair, anger, restlessness and pain of coming to adulthood. In doing so, they have shaped the character of online community to reflect hostility to authority, secrecy and game structures. The sense of combative play engendered by this group extends the range and focus of the imaginative act that entry into cyberspace requires. Alluquere Rosanne Stone points out that

Many of the engineers currently debating the form and nature of cyberspace are the young turks of computer engineering, men in their late teens and twenties, and they are preoccupied with the things with which postpubescent men have always been preoccupied. This rather steamy group will generate the codes and descriptors by which bodies in cyberspace are represented.

What's interesting here in terms of racial discourse is the relationship established between young white men and the sizable numbers of Asian American and Asian Canadian teenage boys who have also contributed to the development of Net culture. The closest parallel is with indie rock and 'zine culture, which is also populated by a predominantly, but neither exclusively nor aggressively white teen tribe. In both cases, Asian youth participate according to the terms of the subculture, which demand a cultural "neutrality." Black youth, with their own clearly defined and visible youth culture, must engage in a more complex negotiation.

The online nation has constructed itself as a community that is not by stated principles racist, but, because of the way nations are always constructed, has built affinities (and by definition, exclusions), that have the effect of shunting aside certain voices, languages and vernaculars. However, this historical condition is now in tremendous flux as the online world grows to become a collection of communities. *Time* magazine has shrieked that "now that the population of the Net is larger than that of most countries in the world... the Internet is becoming Balkanized." I prefer to see the change as more in keeping with the established, decentralizing spirit of the Net. Now at a transitional stage before commerce steps in, cyberspace is open to the free play of subcultures.

Some examples:

~Soc.culture.african.american is one of the busiest of Usenet newsgroups, accumulating hundreds of posts every few hours.
~Dozens of other newsgroups are devoted to a variety of self-defined cultural communities. The speed, anonymity and diffusion of newsgroup debate mean that subjects usually confined to safe, private conversation among friends or family are given semi-public airing on Usenet. Genocide theories and interracial dating are perennials in soc.culture.african.american; everything from assimilation to eating dogs comes up in soc.culture.asian.american.
~In addition to this kind of debate, Aboriginal activists use alt.native and soc.culture.native to get the word out on local struggles and call for support from the online community.
~African American cyberspace activist Art McGee compiles and distributes regular surveys of mailing lists, newsgroups and BBSs of interest to African Americans. The catalogue of mailing lists numbers more than 60, including lists devoted to the Association of Black Sociologists, Cameroonian students studying in London, and departed jazz guru Sun Ra. McGee's signature line is: "The revolution will not be televised, but the proceedings will be available online."
~The creation of NativeNet, a North America-wide online network, organized in part by Aboriginal artists working through the Banff Centre For the Arts.
~The dozens of black-specific electronic bulletin boards in North America, including Black Board International in Toronto, Imhotep in Brooklyn, New York, Pan-Africa Online in Pasadena, California and Girlfriend! in Arlington, Virginia. Many of these BBSs are linked through a U.S. network called Afronet.[*] Afronet has recently been joined by Melanet in linking people of African descent in cyberspace.
~The Russell County BBS in Hobson, Montana, designed as a meeting place and Native art gallery. Russell County is one of a small number of bulletin boards using NAPLPS (North American Presentation Level Protocol Syntax) to compress and distribute Native visual art and children's animation.
~The sale and exchange of digitized porn images caters increasingly to racial fetishes, with white and Asian women carrying the highest currency. The narratives of interracial desire remain popular on porn BBSs; even on African American porn BBSs such as Ebony Shack, images of black male-white female scenarios sometimes outnumber all other configurations.
~As Aboriginal people and people of colour organize online, so do far-right organizations. According to Reuters and U.S. News and World Report, neo-Nazi hate literature has been discovered by browsers on bulletin board systems in Germany, Sweden, France and the Netherlands.

Usenet culture in particular encourages subcultures: with its devotion to trading arcane knowledge and to the same celebration of spontaneous opinion that one finds all over North American talk radio, this medium is tailor-made for generating communities within communities.

Digitalia

"I occupied space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile, but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea."
—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

The discourse of race is, by history and by design, rooted in the body. Cybersubjectivity promises the fantasy of disembodied communication, but it remains firmly connected to bodies through the imaginative act required to project into cyberspace. What cybersubjectivity actually offers is re-embodied communication. So how should I re-embody myself amidst the Net's possibilities for self-presentation? Where should I look for my digitalia, that odd conflux

[KEITH
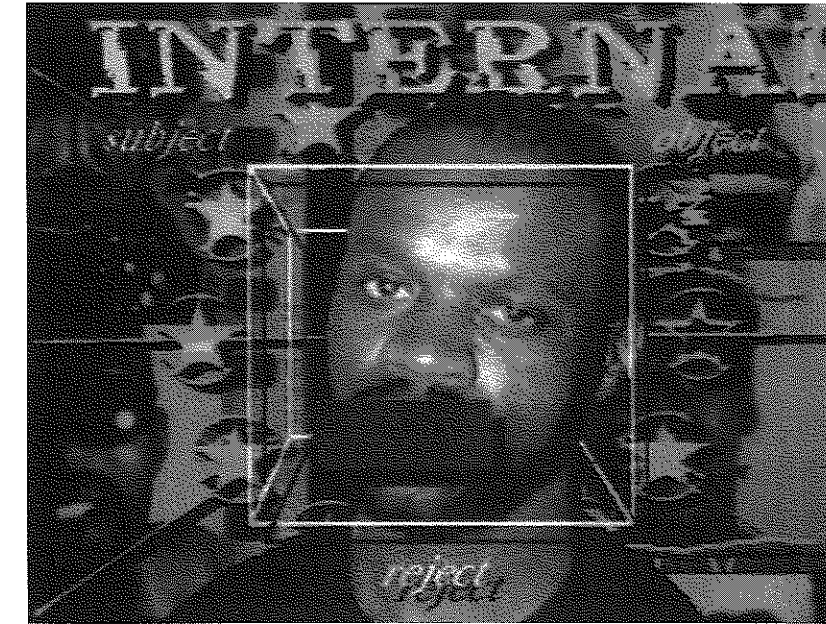
PIPER]

*According to Art McGee, "Afronet is an echomail backbone supported by African and African American BBS sysops across North America. The goal is to distribute notice of conferences with African and African American themes throughout North America. It was originally conceived by Ken Onwere."

of intimacy (genitalia), foreignness (marginalia) and wires? Should I announce myself racially, give myself a secure racial identity? As an experiment, I conducted a poll in CompuServe's African American forum, asking how participants situated themselves online:

> More often than not I do not identify myself when I interact with people except in forums such as this one. Why should I, really? I have had more negative experiences with people being overtly racist in cyberspace than I have in FTF (face to face) life. I find it intriguing to experience what people will tell me when they think I am White. —Deborah Carter

> In the other CompuServe forums and Usenet newsgroups which I frequent, I encounter a lot more racist (and sexist, and homophobic, and anti-Semitic, and otherwise bigoted) messages than in "real life." I think the anonymity of on-line communications is very enticing to bigoted fools. —Peter Jebsen

> Here's a thought: Do you think bigoted people are attracted to cyber-space, or are "normal" people encouraged to show their hidden bigoted sides? — Michelle Pessoa

> I have heard people making derogatory comments about Mexican Americans, Asians, Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals, etc...and although I am not a member of those groups, I feel it is essential that I confront intolerance, period. So I suppose letting people know who I am is not as important to me as letting people know what I will not put up with. —Deborah Carter

What was most interesting about the response was how quickly the thread moved away from the question of how one identifies oneself to a more manageable debate about racism. From what I've been able to glean in this and other online conversations (my survey was limited in sample), many African Americans are unwilling to probe too deeply into what part racial identity plays in their conception of themselves, what part of them stays black when they present no "evidence" of blackness. Race is either "taken for granted" or deliberately left unspoken. In a GEnie conference on African American access to information technology, a quiet consensus emerged on the value of racial anonymity online:

> One nice thing about online communication is that everyone is equal; no one knows how old a participant is, or what color, or what gender, or what religion—which frees our minds a bit to listen to more diverse opinions.

Another participant commented:

> When you type away, no one online need know your skin color. Accents don't matter as much. High-tech is a wonderful way to fight snobbery!

Given that cyberspace is a racialized domain, this sort of virtual transvestism is by no means neutral. In an another era it used to be called passing.

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

about various cosmological approaches to cyberspace, contrast-ing his protagonist Case with the Rastafarian-derived "Zionites" in *Neuromancer*, and making extensive uses of vodun in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. While this offers enormous possibili-ties, there is a danger, at least in fiction, of surrendering to the same sort of essentialism that defines people of colour in exoti-cizing, body-oriented terms. Michael Heim, for instance, in lamenting cyberspace's retreat from the physical body, offers Gibson's Zionites as a symbol of salvation:

> Gibson leaves us the image of a human group who *instinctively* keeps its distance from the computer matrix. These are the Zionites, the religiously *tribal folk* who prefer music to computers and intuitive loyalties to calcula-tion.... As we suit up for the exciting future in cyberspace, we must not lose touch with the Zionites, the *body people* who remain *rooted in the energies of the earth.* (italics mine.)

In the novel, the Zionites are rooted in both technology and spirituality. But taken by Heim as a symbol, they get reduced to "body people."

I prefer to go all the way back to that View Master™, holding it up to the bright Barbados sun so I could see Canada better. Maybe this is an answer: the ecstasy of projected com-munity and irresolvable difference, both claimed at the very same moment.

Further Reading
Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1983.
Benedikt, Michael, ed. *Cyberspace: First Steps.* Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1991.
Bhabha, Homi. "Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative." *Anatomy of Racism.* Ed. David Theo Goldberg. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 183-209.
Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993.
Descartes, René. *Philosophical Writings: A Selection.* Trans. and eds. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach. London: Open University, 1970.
Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks.* New York: Grove Press, 1967.
Gibson, William. *Neuromancer.* New York: Ace Books, 1984.
Green, Noah. "The Sixth Borough: A Bulletin Board Grows in Brooklyn." *Village Voice* July 12, 1994. 38-39.
Hall, Stuart. "New Ethnicities." In *Black Film, British Cinema.* ICA Documents 7. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988. 27-30.
Hayward, Philip and Tana Wollen, eds. *Future Visions: New Technologies of the Screen.* London: BFI Publishing, 1993.
Kehoe, Brendan P. *Zen and the Art of the Internet: A Beginner's Guide to the Internet.* Internet: 1992
Maw, Joan and John Picton, eds. *Concepts of the Body/Self in Africa.* Wien: Afro-Pub, 1992.
Mercer, Kobena, and Isaac Julien. "De Margin and De Centre." *Screen* 29.4 (Autumn 1988).
Murrell, William, host. "Information Highway Discussion on African American Issues." GEnie. June 13, 1993, 10:00p.m.
Schneider, Karen G. "Poverty and Information." Usenet post: kgs@panix.com.

OH TELEVISION. OH CANADA.

Does either really matter anymore? There seems to be a sense these days that both TV and nation have nothing left to communicate—that each contains repetitive gestures that we've seen too many times before. Forget that old "effects" model of communica-tions which holds that TV can somehow powerfully persuade us all to adopt specific attitudes, behaviours and moral values. When nothing really flows through the glass tit anymore except for "Friends" and its ilk, does this matter? And forget the once-grand idea of using television for the purposes of nation-building. At a time when the Canadian state is actively involved in the wholesale embrace of a global market, and the CBC has been cut back not just to the bone, but now to the marrow, such national-ist concerns are treated only as minor irritations. And yet, such disparaging words about pedestrian objects fail to account for the complexity both of TV and nation as forces for the reworking of social and cultural life. We still long for their stories, how-ever untrue, meanspirited and overwhelmingly driven by profit they may be. And in these days of radically shifting parameters—of technology, of capital, of social value—we need to be attentive to the ways in which these new reconfigurations may allow or disallow certain tales to be told. Today, programming has left the hands of the transmitters (the state, the networks), and is now found in the transmission devices of computer modem, VCR and remote control; it also resides in a populist individualism. We may all now zip and zap and time-shift through a structured agenda at will. Does this allow for new freedoms? Or only ensure that more frightening tyrannies prevail?

BETH SEATON