DIGITIZING RACE

Visual Cultures of the Internet

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Epilogue
The Racio-Visual Logic of the Internet

Mark Poster argues that "visual studies . . . is best understood as part of a broader domain in the cultural study of information machines."[1] The difference between present and earlier visual regimes is that "we employ information machines to generate images . . . and to see."[2] Rather than asserting that culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century is somehow inherently more visually oriented than it has been at other times in history, he claims instead that experiences of the image are now defined by their mediation by machines. The Internet is a visual technology, a protocol for seeing that is interfaced and networked in ways that produce a particular set of *racial formations*. These formations arose in a specific historical period: the premillennial neoliberal moment, when race was disappeared from public and governmental discourse while at the same time policies regarding Internet infrastructures and access were being formed.[3]

Studies of the Internet have followed suit, in that they have emphasized the technology of image making as well as the technology of its reception but have failed to consider its racio-visual logic. The work of visual culture studies, on the other hand, as described by Nick Mirzoeff, "highlights those moments where the visual is contested, debated, and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gendered, sexual, and racialized identities."[4] Digital game spaces and cyberspace abstract the process of body visualization by embedding the creation

of digital bodies within a series of hierarchical choices, mimicking the menu structure of modern operating systems interfaces. This book seeks to rematerialize the Internet, a form of digital representation seen as being resistant to grounded forms of critique by art historians because of its insubstantial and ephemeral nature, by locating its material base in specifically embodied users and producers, its use as a communicative technology as well as a form of media, and its engagement with other offline and online popular, medical, and technological visual cultures. Veiled Muslim AIM buddies deployed in Instant Messenger are created by users who participate in a vital youth culture that coalesces around online chat. These avatars kitted out in chadors and DKNY sweaters fill a gap in the available forms of bodily representation that AIM users can find circulating in the world of avatar sharing. The tension between the representation of the veil, a sign of privacy and a controversial symbol of female subordination under Islam, and its positioning on a hyperfeminized and overtly displayed cartoon body creates a virtual body that works to negotiate the notion of the nation-state in the world of IM embodiment. Similarly, pregnant avatars used to adorn and supplement posts to women's bulletin boards are collaboratively produced artifacts of the popular culture of the Internet that address pregnant women's socially invisible bodies in the context of "scientific" and medical representation.

Nick Mirzoeff writes that visual culture critique engages with "any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet. Such criticism takes account of the importance of image making, the formal components of a given image, and the crucial completion of that work by its cultural reception."[5] In this book I have interrogated the ways that users of color and women have used the Internet's graphical spaces to produce images that modify and enhance existing images of bodies, families, politics, and interfaces. In addition, the dynamic and interactive nature of online communities in particular means that the issue of reception is always up front and center. Users comment vociferously on each other's visual objects of self-representation. Praise and critique are mixed with requests for technical assistance in image creation and uploading; these images work actively to help create the sense of a community that "knows" itself through images. Popular Internet entertainments like online quizzes and tests like alllooksame.com encourage an interrogation of the visuality of race online. Postmillennial science fiction films and advertising campaigns like Apple's iPod commercials and print ads are uniquely responsive to issues regarding the representation of interfaces in cinema but represent people of color as its objects rather than its subjects, in many

cases. And online petitions to protest retail and media racism in the offline world use digital visual means to critique offline visual cultures.

The Internet is the world's largest and most extensive vector for still and streaming networked popular media images. Indeed, it possesses its own popular culture, which exists in parallel to, and inevitably intersects with, non-media-based cultural forms such as youth culture, car culture, consumer culture, domestic culture, activist culture, and women's culture. In this book I offer a method for use in analyzing the Internet's visual culture in relation not only to older media forms—a method that has become the standard for analyzing new media—but also to a matrix of lived cultural practices, identities, geopolitics, and postcolonial, racial, and political positions. These positions are expressed through and within other offline vectors as well; they exist within other nonmedia visual cultures.[6] Indeed, as Steve Jones's anthologies of the same name attest, we do live in a "cybersociety"; however, it is defined by its ever-more-frenetic consumption and deployment of digital images of identity by a less-experienced, radically stratified, and broad base of users as well as by the pursuit of unlimited personal freedom and mobility for a small technological elite.[7] In 1998, the year that *Cyber-Society 2.0* was published, most Americans did not yet live in a "cybersociety," but since then the Internet has become a mass visual form.

People of color and women are not as well represented in biennials, the world of zines, independent film, and other expressive forums, much less in mainstream film and media. And all told, their cultural production on the Internet is far from dominant. However, a key difference between the Internet and other media forms is the production of a visual culture expressive of racial and ethnic identity that is potentially available to a much broader group of people. We should celebrate the creative interventions of teenage Muslim girls, pregnant women, and other users who have appropriated the Internet to create visual images that represent themselves in their bodily particularities such as chadors, pregnant bellies, and ultrasound photographs. Yet this encouraging use of the Internet for nonnormative bodies to be displayed, circulated, and modified, to be made to signify racial and gender identities that exceed or resist already-existing templates, must be understood within the larger frame of early-twenty-first-century cultural politics and industrial imperatives. A sea change within the realm of cyberculture and media culture occurred in 2000. The newfound enthusiasm for a more profitable, stable, and visual Internet—Web 2.0—after the earlier disastrous Internet crash tempered utopian sentiments about the Internet's power to transform users' lives and produced new, more modestly framed notions of

the self online. The precrash discourse that posed virtual reality as an alternative to real life was replaced by one that cannily envisions identity online as a set of profiles, preferences, settings, and other protocols rather than a bona fide and understandably creepy "second self." Cautions of Internet addiction have gone by the wayside since Web 2.0, for there is relatively little affective investment in online life posited here; tales of users getting married or living their "real" lives in online social spaces have withered away, casualties of a postmillennial acculturation to a new concept of virtual community that is less intensely focused on the Internet as a replacement for "real life." Users no longer speak of VR and RL because they no longer feel as closely connected to their overtly fictional identities online. They just don't identify with, or care about, their avatars as much as they once did.

Yet at the same time, people of color and women care *greatly* about how they are visualized on the Internet. They care enough to sign protests about media racism, and when they don't like what they see, they care enough to sign online petitions and perhaps even to sit down and create new some templates, new images of themselves, new databodies that talk back to the dominant. However, the tone I wish to take is cautiously optimistic and tells a story that is necessarily as much about social, economic, and technological constraint as it is about triumphant self-definition and self-determination. In a sense, the evolution of a pervasive graphical practice and culture on the Internet has come to resemble the visual culture of other media; finally there are enough producers of color and of colorful images on the Internet that one can legitimately speak of "black new media" just as one can speak of "black film," "black art," and "black theater." In a sense, however, this merely signifies a repetition of the issues that plague the study of minority discourse in *all* visual cultures. Brave young Arab American women hacking their AIM buddies in their bedrooms are a sentimentally attractive image that fits into a classic narrative of rebellion and resistance against dominant new media cultures. The issue of a basically unthreatened material base for participation, unchanged technological protocols, unchallenged economic systems—in short, the pesky problem of protest within a system that one is nonetheless employing to frame the protest—continues to haunt the study of minority new media cultures. While avatars wearing chadors and DKNY sweaters certainly look different from more mainstream images of American femininity, and in fact contain a wealth of fascinating information that scholars and fans of hybrid cultures will greatly enjoy, they contain exactly the same number of pixels, are formatted in the same file type, and occupy the same amount of space in an IM screen as do all the others. Any deviation

from this strict industrial norm simply does not work within the program
owing to the file protocols of Instant Messenger, protocols that are immutably
exacting and resistant to modification owing to technological lock-in and
are the direct result of a mature Internet economy and broad user base. Any
change to this platform for communication would require the cooperation
and blessing of several different media conglomerates at this point. The
changes that are possible using the culture-jamming or hacking model of
new media resistance and critique are necessarily constrained and limited
by the form or "system" that enables them. The continuing monetization of
the Internet's forms and technological apparatuses practically guarantees
that this issue will remain a thorny one.

The cases that I examine in this volume exemplify the efforts of previ-
ously new and previously unexpressive groups of users who are using the
Internet to actively visualize themselves despite and within these con-
straints, their differing races, their complicated genders, their generative
and bereft bodies. Yet at the same time, they are performing this cultural
work while living in a post-neoliberal age in which race "doesn't matter";
and it has become profoundly unfashionable to be one thing or another,
and actively dangerous to signify race or ethnicity in the public sphere. The
American judiciary system is leaning away from protecting citizens who are
victimized on the basis of race; however, this trend merely reflects, rather
than drives, the culture's profound disenchantment with antiracist discourse
altogether. As the Yale legal scholar Kenji Yoshino writes: "Americans are
already sick to death of identity politics; the courts are merely following
suit."[8] While surveys of Internet usage work to reify the notion of racial
groups as traditionally conceived—fast or furious, slow or tepid, as far as
they are concerned every single person who can pick up a phone or boot up
a computer belongs to a group called "Asian American," "African Ameri-
can," "Hispanic," or "white"—Web sites like alllooksame.com work to
remind users that these categories are national, quasi-biological, visual, politi-
cal, and above all unanchored in facticity and intensely subjective. While
these usage or "penetration" surveys are vitally important objects of study
by both humanists and social scientists because they are often used to inform
public policy regarding education and computer access, they are only part of
the story. Though Internet use by racial minorities is indeed increasing, this
is not in itself reason to be optimistic about the medium's ability to enfranchise
minorities in a realm of friction-free digital production and self-expression.
In the true spirit of neoliberalism, being permitted to exist is not the same
as equal representation. Digital visual capital is a commodity that is not

freely given to all; as has always been the case with capital of any kind, it must be negotiated and at times actively seized by those to whom it would otherwise not be given.

The racio-visual logic of the graphical Internet allows race to be *seen* more than ever before, yet the conditions of its visualization are such that users of color and women from the everyday world are only now forming a nascent digital imaging practice that refuses to "cover" itself, one that exists within a matrix of practices that do. As Susan Courtney wonders: "What makes a culture, in a century marked by intense waves of racial and ethnic immigration and migration, mixing and contestation, form and sustain the belief that 'race' is something we know when we see?... We have much to learn in this regard from cinema, a medium that profoundly contributes to the ascension of the visual as a dominant location and guarantee of racial meaning in the twentieth century."[9] The development of the Internet has been such that visuality has become a form of representation widely available to users as producers only relatively recently. The paradox of digital visuality, a "feature" of the type of broadband infrastructure that we have chosen to develop, is that like cinema it can work to reinstate an understanding of race as always visible and available to the naked eye, a quality to be determined and epistemologically locked down by a viewer rather than understood as contested and contingent. As Courtney contends, the movies assert that the truth of race is a truth that can be known by looking. Yet the other side of this paradox, as my examples illustrate, is that the graphical Internet makes covering less *compulsory*. The Internet is not at all like cinema in this sense; users have the option to perform their identities in ways that are not possible elsewhere. On the Internet, users *do* as well as *are* their race; this networked racial positioning broadcasts this doing in ways that explicitly un-"cover" race. As Yoshino writes: "We see an assimilation model of civil rights formally ceding to an accommodation model.... The assimilation model protects *being* a member of a group, but not *doing* things associated with the group. Under this model, courts protect skin color but not language, chromosomes but not pregnancy, and same-sex desire but not same-sex marriage."[10] Thus is racial and gender inequity perpetuated. The social and legal compulsion to cover, or to "minimize the race-salient traits that distinguish [one] from the white mainstream," is founded on the assumption that a marked racial position is a stigma that the individual has the right and indeed the obligation to hide. And until lately, the structure of the Internet has been such that it has greatly facilitated covering; early utopians especially lauded and adored the Internet's ability to hide or anonymize

race as its best and most socially valuable feature. The Internet was just as much a machine for not-seeing as it was a machine of vision, at least in terms of race and gender identity. However, the promiscuous visualization of race by new users of color and women in the postmillennial age claims the right to *do* as well as *be*. All this while myriad other social institutions such as the law, education, medicine, and the culture at large work to un-matter race, to make it cease to mean.

By examining a range of new digital production practices by creators of minority popular visual cultures on the Internet, I have hoped to give a sense of how this group of users *sees*, rather than merely how they *are seen* or represented, what they are making as well as what they are using, what they are doing as well as what they are being. The results are encouraging. However, as the popular *Matrix* sequels and other millennial science fiction films demonstrate, the massification of the Internet has not damaged the market for traditionally racialized representations of people of color as primitive and sexual if black, and machinic and inherently technological if Asian. White people are still depicted as the users that matter in these narratives that are so influential among popular audiences, especially young audiences. It is in some sense a cause for mourning that *The Matrix* films are so popular with youth of color in particular. The profound formal influence of digital visual interface styles and logics on the current language of film, especially science fiction film, reminds us that the visual culture of the Internet bears watching in several media, not just on the laptop screen.

For as Morpheus intones portentously at several points in these films, "It's all connected." The way that the Internet looks is the way that film, television, cell phones, and the ubiquitous screens that surround us look or will come to look. And who is to have root control over this converged media space, this universe of screens? The time during which the Internet could reasonably be viewed as a possible alternative space where egalitarian utopias might be constructed by plucky resistance fighters of any age or gender is long over. In its place we have a situation that is much more complicated, yet far from disheartening. The instances where users *refuse* to cover, the spaces and bodies that they claim, modify, and disseminate on the Internet, display a racio-visual logic of new media identity. This logic dictates that anyone who can take a picture can upload a file and can create visual images of race or commentaries on its visualization that stand in defiance of a neoliberal stance that tries to disappear race. In short, despite its numerous shortcomings, the Internet allows "common" users to represent their bodies and deploy these bodies in social, visual, and aesthetic transactions. This is

not the case in film culture, literary culture, or art culture; indeed, the influence of the Internet on these media forms has changed them permanently, creating a new culture of shared participation and popular collaboration, one that continues to profoundly transfigure the way that media industries work.[11]

However, not all has changed. The racio-visual logic of the Internet works as a series of paradoxes. Digital systems such as facial recognition software operationalize and instrumentalize race just as the Human Genome Project tells us precisely which locations on the human gene set "contain" race. The resurgence of scientism, in particular the privileging of the biotechnological sciences, has been powerfully documented and critiqued by scholars such as Donna Haraway, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Maria Fernandez. This high-cultural valuation of science as a way of understanding identity, behavior, and the self as social actor continues to erode humanistically based notions of the subject as socially constructed. This backlash against social constructivism continues apace in myriad spheres of life and not incidentally undermines the notion of race and gender as socially constituted forms that merit and demand active alteration and negotiation for the better. Yet at the same time, the Internet itself continually offers new opportunities that are taken up by all sorts of users for precisely these types of negotiations to occur at the visual level, a level that is deeply appealing and compelling to a broad range of people. The official public discourse prevalent in educational, political, and other knowledge-creating institutions continues to trumpet the message that we are all the same underneath the skin, triumphantly individual and self-efficacious at all times, and that if we are not, it is our own fault. Yet still, that skin continues to digitally articulate itself in its difference, perhaps for the first time in a public forum that is as yet much less regulated than other media spaces for visual representation. In defiance of public discourse that says that race doesn't exist and doesn't matter, either scientifically or practically, users continue to make avatars, Web sites, quizzes, moving image sequences, and petitions that say that it does, and it does. Despite uneven forms of access to Internet technology, there are burgeoning visual cultures of race on the Internet authored by people of color and women. These cultures flourish in the out-of-the-way spaces of the popular Internet, in the online communities for mothers, teens, disgruntled consumers, and everyday interactions. Really seeing them means looking more closely at the Internet and looking differently.