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In the mechanical age, technology was viewed as instrumental, a means to an end; users were figured as already formed subjects who approach it, rather than as 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. I'd like to cite a striking example: the MCI television advertisement entitled "Anthem," which claims that "on the Internet," there is no gender, no age, no race, "only minds." This ad sells not only MCI Internet services but also a particular kind of content: the idea that getting online and becoming part of a global network will liberate the user from the body with its inconvenient and limiting attributes such as race, gender, disability, age. In a sense, it is positing a postcorporeal subjectivity, an afterimage of the body and of identity. Though "Anthem" illustrates this bracketing off of difference—racial, gendered, aged, and so forth—particularly well, it is easy to find plenty of others from other technological discourses that reveal a similar sensibility, though perhaps not in as overt a way. This commercial is, however, unusually above board in its claims that telecommunications change the nature of identity.

MCI's project links up nicely with a term from my title "After/ Images of Identity." The word "after/image" implies two things to me in the context of contemporary technoscience and cyberculture.

First, the rhetorical charge of the word "after/image" conveys a sense of the millennial drive to categorize social and cultural phenomena as "Post" and "After." It puts pressure on the formerly solid and anchoring notion of "identity" as something we 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.
The second is this: the image 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 the television, CRT terminal, movie screen, any of the sources of virtual light to which we are exposed every day. To pursue this metaphor further, and join it to the first reading of the title, how have the blinding 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, as opposed to after/images of identity. When we look at these rhetorics and images of cyberspace, we are seeing an after/image—both posthuman and projectionary—meaning it 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 Hartouni's words, "The fierce and frantic iteration of conventional meanings and identities in the context of technologies and techniques that render them virtually unintelligible." According to this logic, stable images of identity have been replaced by "after/images." 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 using the term "virtual reality." MCI's "Anthem," like all anthems, works on a semiotic level which establishes a sense of a national self. However, in a radically disruptive move, it simultaneously deconstructs the notion of a corporeal self anchored in familiar categories of identity. Indeed, this example of "screen fatigue" (commercials are great examples of screen fatigue because they're so fatiguing) projects a particular kind of after/image of identity.

This commercial includes gender as only one of a series of outmoded "body categories" like race, age, and so forth. The ungendered, deracinated self promised to us by MCI 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 in northern California 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 personas—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." 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 an article called "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet" (see Nakamura 1999). In it I 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 "after/images" of identity that users were creating by adopting personas 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 gender as amusing prostheses that could be donned and shed without "real-life" consequences. Like tourists who become convinced that their travels have shown them real "native" life, these identity tourists often took their virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatars as a kind of lived truth.

In recent years, there has been increased academic interest in the study of identity and the ways in which it is constructed by cultural formations. Academic discourse tends to use similar terms to do this, as these paper titles from a recent conference demonstrate: "Bodies, Subjectivities, and Identities: The Politics of (Re)presentation," "The Ongoing Effects of Colonization, Cultural Subordination, and the Question of Identity," "Ethnicity and Representation in the Conjuncture of Global Capitalism," and "The Cultural Politics of National Identification in Transnational Spaces."

The rhetorical structure of these titles reveals a great deal about current assumptions regarding "identity" and how we discuss it in academe. In one of these titles the "body" is placed in a series with "subjectivities" and "identities," as if it had the same kind of abstract or at least culturally contingent status, "colonization and cultural
subordination” spoken of as ongoing rather than a fait accompli, or as an artifact of the already done, the historical. Identity is being “rethought” and framed as a “question” rather than an essence or definable quantity, and what’s more, in its reframing, it is discovered to have a “cultural politics” of “national” and other “identifications.” “Ethnicity and representation” are framed as if one were an effect of the other, or at least as if they had a reciprocal relationship.

These titles come from the 1998 program of the 15th Meeting of Association for Asian American Studies called “Rethinking Asian and Pacific Colonial/Postcolonial Nations, Identities, and Histories.” However, these session titles could just as easily be found in an MLA panel, an American Studies panel, or any of a long list of others. Does this mean that academics are all doing the same work and calling it the same thing, thereby giving lie to the idea of disciplinary specificity, or are they all doing different things and calling it the same thing? Are these titles all deviations or challenges to the idea of specific and differentiated disciplines? What does it mean that these same words recur in similar patterns in so many academic places and occasions? What are we in technology/cyberspace studies doing? How do we define our work?

Obviously, we are doing different things, even if we are using similar titles. We are sharing some critical language but directing our attention toward different things. Cyberspace studies are still being defined, and this volume is a very important part of that exciting work. We are not looking at technology instrumentally; our sessions look very different from SEBOLD’s or SEMICON’s or a Java developers’ meeting. It’s clear that the language of critical theory is a big part of this act of definition and interrogation. This question of identity, subjectivity, the body, transnationality is being looked at from all sides—ethnic studies, women’s studies, literary studies, historical studies, sociological studies, and cultural studies. Just as the cyborg, that Harawayan avatar of postmodern identity, is a hybrid of different parts, machine and human, so is cyberspace studies itself a hybrid Frankenstein of sorts. These titles use punctuation like slashes, parentheses, scare quotes, and hyphenations to create pieced together, fragmented titles that thereby give lie to the idea of disciplinary specificity, or are they all doing different things and calling it the same thing? Are these titles all deviations or challenges to the idea of specific and differentiated disciplines? What does it mean that these same words recur in similar patterns in so many academic places and occasions? What are we in technology/cyberspace studies doing? How do we define our work?

Critical theory itself as 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; the first stereotype was a mechanical device that could reproduce images relatively cheaply, quickly, and in mass quantities. Now that image-reproducing machines like the Internet are 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 is a machine that is good at manufacturing linguistic kludges and hacks.) I’d like to introduce it because it acknowledges that identity has indeed become, in some important sense, “after,” but that its after/images are still “typed,” still mired in oppressive roles even if the “body” has been left behind or bracketed. I posit it as a corrective to the disturbingly utopian strain I see embodied in the MCI commercial in particular and in much of the literature I see today.

In the disturbingly utopian strain I see embodied in the MCI commercial in particular and in much of the literature I see today, I see a recuperation of the idea that identity is shifting into the realm of the “virtual,” a place not without its own stereotype of the “cyborg.” However, these session titles could just as easily be found in an MLA panel, an American Studies panel, or any of a long list of others. Does this mean that academics are all doing the same work and calling it the same thing, thereby giving lie to the idea of disciplinary specificity, or are they all doing different things and calling it the same thing? Are these titles all deviations or challenges to the idea of specific and differentiated disciplines? What does it mean that these same words recur in similar patterns in so many academic places and occasions? What are we in technology/cyberspace studies doing? How do we define our work?

While telecommunications and medical technologies can challenge some gender and racial stereotypes, they produce and reflect them as well. Cybertypes of the biotechnology-enhanced or perfected woman and of the Internet’s invisible minorities, who can log onto the Net and be taken for “white,” participate in an ideology of liberation from marginalization and devaluation. 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, men from the curse of hair loss, and minorities online from the stigma of their race since no one can see them, reinforces 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 “new boss, same as the new 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 reveals that when users are free to choose their own identity, 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 that produces and reveals cybertyping is not the fault of the user or even primarily an effect of technology. Microsoft’s corporate slogan “Where do you want to go today?” another example of the discourse of technological liberation, 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. In the end, despite academic and commercial postidentitarian discourses, 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. 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 humans, 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,” 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, theorists such as Donna Haraway, who radically question 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.’” 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 coalitions—affinity, not identity.” 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 groups similarly constructed as Others.

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) that MCI and other teletechnology corporations are staking out their positions as forces that will free us from race and gender? Barbara Christian, in her 1986 essay “The Race for Theory: Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism” saw a similar kind of “coincidence” in regard to the increasing dominance of literary theory as a required and validated 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 “surfaced, interestingly enough, just when the literature of peoples of color, of black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans, began to move ‘to the center.’” 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 her essay (it has been well documented that telecommunications technologies encourage paranoia), but I too wonder whether MCI’s claims are not slightly too well-timed. Learning curves for Net literacy are notoriously high; those of us who maintain class listservs and Web sites and 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 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. Cyber-typing and other epiphenomena of high technologies in the age of the Internet is partly the result of 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. Though minority groups are not yet well represented as producers and authors of the Net’s texts, their position as consumers on the Net represents at least the beginnings of meaningful participation. 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 outdated souvenir of the body. Indeed, sites such as avillage.com, Oxygen.com, Salon.com’s Hip Mama webpages, and NetNoir (which contains content specifically geared to women and African Americans) indicate a shift in the Internet’s content, which reflects a partial bridging of the digital divide. As women of color acquire an increasing presence online, their particular interests that 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 coopted 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 Web sites, 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.) Nonetheless, this shift in content which specifically addresses women and minorities, either as markets or as political entities, 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 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 its lawyers called ‘the first civil rights class action litigation against an Internet company,’” the Equal Rights Center, a Washington-based civil rights group, and two African-American plaintiffs are suing Kozmo for racial “redlining” because of what they believe is a pattern of those neighborhoods not being served.” 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,” however, the company’s judgment of what constitutes an Internet-penetrated zip code follows racial lines as well. African American Washingtonians such as James Warren and Winona Lake used their Internet access to order goods from Kozmo, only to be told that their zip codes aren’t served by the company. Kozmo.com also refuses to deliver to a neighborhood of Washington, DC, occupied primarily by upper-class African Americans with equal “Internet penetration” as white neighborhoods. It seems that these African American Internet users possessed identities online that too firmly moored them 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 you live 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 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 “the 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 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 cybereabled fluidity and liberation do not grow so insular and self-absorbed as to forget this.

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Notes


9. Since the incredible dominance of the Internet by the World Wide Web in the mid-nineties, it has consistently supported this construction of women as bodies. The saying that the Internet is 90 percent pornography and advertising, while it may be a slight exaggeration, gestures toward the Internet's role as an extremely efficient purveyor of exploitative images of women. Similarly, the Internet's current bent toward merchandising and selling online constructs women as either "markets" or more commonly as scantily clad figures in commercials for products.


Works Cited


