

Talking Race and Cyberspace

An Interview with Lisa Nakamura

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I met Internet scholar Lisa Nakamura at a conference held in Oslo in late 2001, where she showed how techno-utopian dreams reproduced racist patterns. Her analysis was shockingly normal because it once again proved how “the old” gets teleported into the new in a friction-free manner. Nakamura’s work shows how the Internet, despite all its claims to the alternative, remains a part of dominant visual culture. This flirting with fluid identities, so common in the roaring nineties, distracted Internet advocates from further investigations, a pattern that has, of course, changed over the past years. A number of conferences have been held, studies have been written and published, and Lisa Nakamura’s work stands out within the emerging field of new media studies. I conducted the following e-mail interview after Lisa and I got involved in a debate about the merits of “Internet research.”

Geert Lovink: Let’s start our dialogue with a thesis. If the Internet, in terms of acceptance and user cultures, has reached its phase of “normalization,” the logical consequence is that the Net is as racist as the society it stems from. Is there any evidence that this is the case? What do you think of such a “mirror” theory? In your book *Cybertypes*, you speak of a cyberspace that needs to examine its roots in society.

Lisa Nakamura: Certainly the Net is as racist as the societies that it stems from. How could this not be true? Is it not true of all other media forms, including literature, film, and television?

Why should the Internet be different? I do, however, think that the Internet does more than “mirror” ideology from the culture at large; distinctive aspects of the Internet as a communication technology are lacking in other media, and its interfaces do as much to create particular kinds of identities as the Internet does to reflect them.

I don’t think that *Cybertypes* was the first book to say that cyberspace needs

to examine its roots in society. The second wave of post-utopian backlash, like Sandy Stone's work, did that. I think that it tried to say that the Internet's interfaces made some identity choices unavailable, some unavoidable, and otherwise served to police and limit the kinds of ways that people could define themselves. The Internet hails its audiences in the same ways that texts have intended readers, that films and television shows have intended audiences, and that made environments are intended for particular users. And in its earlier stages the Internet was not hailing people of color; it assumed a normative white user and in fact often still does.

GL: Could you tell us where Internet "race" research stands at the moment? I remember that at some point two large U.S. conferences took place. However, as you previously noted, "digital divide" statistics are changing, both within the United States and elsewhere. Asian-Americans can perhaps no longer be classified as disadvantaged. Without much notice, the Chinese have become the second biggest user group, after the Americans. The majority of content on the Net is no longer in English. Nevertheless, certain power relations remain and new inequalities are created.

LN: The two events that you refer to are the "Race in Digital Space" conferences, which are cosponsored by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Southern California. These conferences are fantastic, but they are not yet established in the way that other discipline-oriented conferences are. I agree with you about certain power relations—such as institutionalized racism—remaining and new inequalities being created. I think that two of the most striking new inequalities are the division between broadband and dial-up users and the way that some people, such as Asian Americans, who seem to be privileged users of the Internet, are being targeted as markets for Web-based commerce rather than as communities who can organize themselves to get things done. So being on the Internet is not in and of itself an unmitigated good.

GL: How do groups like the Association for Internet Research (www.aior.org) deal with race-related issues? Could you describe for us the general level of academic research at this moment? On the one hand there seems to be a positive tendency toward empirical studies, but on the other hand this tendency seems to result in a lot of mediocre and unimaginative work. Most of the current theory is not compelling. In that sense normalization has also reached new media theory. Is it perhaps time to move on from the Internet? Should we stop projecting so much hope and so many expectations onto this medium and its scholars?

LN: I completely agree with you on the issue of empirical studies tending to dominate the Association of Internet Research (AoIR), at least from my point

of view. Other conferences don't tend to mix humanist-critical approaches with empirical-social scientific approaches, but AoIR does, partly in an attempt to be inclusive and partly because there's strength in numbers; the conference would be a much smaller and therefore less important conference if it were split up by approach. But I don't think that the attempts at inclusion by AoIR are really working, because humanists tend to attend the humanist talks and the social scientists tend to attend the social science talks, as if two parallel conferences were happening. I'm all for supporting the field, but the things that a communications scientist has to say about coding and counting the number of nonverbal indicators that participants use in chat rooms is of far less interest to me than the things that literary or critical race scholars have to say about nationality and identity. AoIR doesn't really deal with race-related issues, though its organizers did ask me to give a keynote talk at their conference in Minneapolis a few years ago, which shows that they want to do it more. Their intentions are very good, and I can't exactly account for the lack of good work on race-related topics at that conference. I like the American Studies Association or the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conferences much better in regard to new media theory.

I don't assume, however, that new media theorists talking about things other than or in addition to the Internet will result in more "compelling theory." I don't think that the lack of compelling theory is due to a narrow focus on the Internet. I think that it is due to a lack of cultural studies-oriented instruction at the university level here in the U.S., and the lack of institutional support and intellectual community for scholars in new media. It's really hard to get grants from anyone to support this work. I don't think that the National Endowment for the Humanities or the American Council of Learned Societies has ever given grants for new media studies, unless the applicants are talking about literary critical modes of reading hypertext.

So I clearly don't think that it's time to move on yet. I think that there's so much really fascinating stuff about the Internet now that it has become a mass form. So many things, such as online petitions, ethnic identity Websites, the culture of IM, and graphical social-networked chats like Sims online, are still undertheorized, yet millions of people deploy them all the time. I'll be addressing these issues in my next book, but they're sort of arbitrarily chosen; I've seen nothing good written about plenty of other issues. I think that there's no shortage whatsoever of things on the Internet that are worth writing about. I think that it's because critics still don't have a compelling critical methodology or toolkit that allows for a reading of ideology and identity in new media—like what John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* did for semiotics and visual analysis.

GL: Have you found racist elements in recent calls to keep IT jobs in the

USA. and prevent companies from shifting jobs to South Asia? I am thinking of sites like <http://www.gnp.org/>.

LN: Yes, I certainly have. A *Wired* magazine cover from February 2004 depicted a South Indian woman with a veil and a computer program written in mendhi on her palm, which is turned to display to the viewer. I found this quite perfect, since it envisions a feminine exotic as the source of outsourcing; mendhi is traditionally used to decorate brides in India, and the notion that the language of code has replaced all other forms of ritual, especially those related to gender and domesticity, seems to place the blame for the erosion (or at least failed promise) of information jobs in America on women and racialized Others.

As a postcolonial theory scholar, I see this as a very predictable and traditional continuation of the project of racial categorization vis-à-vis labor that has justified colonialism since forever. As Madhavi Kale and Vijay Prashad describe in their excellent accounts of colonial racialization, South Indians have long been envisioned by the empire as ideal workers and, particularly in recent years, as ideal technology workers. This is part of another divide-and-conquer strategy; it's a lot easier for cheap-ass corporations to blame racialized Others for the loss of IT jobs than it is for them to take responsibility for their hiring practices.

GL: If we put "old media" such as film and television aside, how do you view the fascination for interfaces in new media studies?

LN: I see the fascination for interfaces in new media studies coming from two places: visual culture and formalism. A couple of years ago Lev Manovich won a Guggenheim award in the area of "new media" for his book *The Language of New Media* (he was the first winner in this area as far as I know). I teach his book and am certain that he deserved the award because he produced the first coherent methodology for reading the form of new media. This is what academic disciplines need to become legitimate, because all scholarly journals want to know what sort of methodology you're using when you submit stuff to them, and some of us have to jump through that hoop to get tenure. If there's no method of formalist reading for an object of study, there can be no methodology. So I admire his work for that. However, he barely mentions the Internet, and his book has the same problem that all formalist reading has; it's divorced from politics in general and identity politics in particular. So there is nothing about race in cyberspace in that book, and it generally establishes no argument or polemic about new media forms. His book does, however, say that others need to make such arguments, and it also strongly advocates a cultural studies approach, which is enabling and useful for scholars who do the sort of work I do.

So he writes about interfaces in that book, which served to establish the in-

terface as the privileged object of study. And of course visual culture is interested in the interface because it is visual and old media studies are not very good at (or interested in) saying much about interfaces, so it's a ripe opportunity to establish a hegemony in something new and growing. It's obvious that TiVO, Replay, and other DVRs, not to mention cable and satellite TV usage, force television watchers to interact with interfaces all the time, so it's not as if old media studies, like television studies, can afford not to talk about interfaces. I think that people also like to privilege interfaces because they do not seem to have an overt politics: they seem to be "neutral," which is, of course, not true. But they are appealing because they can be viewed that way. I still see pervasive efforts to hold onto at least parts of the utopian perspective from the nineties; people would really like to believe that the Internet is more a force for democracy than not. I am not especially down with that program.

GL: It's stating the obvious that the world of "code" is a white male universe, but can we also read this limited culture in the code itself?

LN: Well, I am not a computer programmer, so I can't really speak to the form of code. Others have noticed that some of the UNIX commands like "man" and "kill" seem oriented around a masculinist discourse, and that seems obvious. Clearly, code is based on the ASCII character set, which is Western, and many of the UNIX commands are abbreviations of English words (I think that "man" is short for "manual"). So it seems that code is more about alienating nonspeakers of non-Romance languages.

GL: What do you make of the phenomenal growth of the Internet in China? Wouldn't it make much more sense to broaden up Internet studies and include the massive uptake, in particular in non-Western countries, of cell phones? Why do we emphasize so strongly the importance of visual and written cultures while overlooking the oral technologies that politely circumvent the office typewriter?

LN: I wasn't aware of the huge growth of the Internet in China until you told me about it, since my work focuses mainly on the Internet as part of the popular cultures of the United States. Yes, I certainly think that it is time to "broaden up" Internet studies to include cell phones, and it is also necessary to insist on the specificity of the technologies being used and their contexts and histories. I'm thinking in particular of the term "cyberspace," which was often used to describe electronically simulated interactive environments, such as virtual reality, video games, the Internet, and even the phone. It became such a mushy term that I found it hard to use. I also got irritated with the privileging of virtual reality among critics, especially among television critics, since it seems to be such an elitist move, one that most people will never experience. It seems most interesting to scholars because it is such a good example of simulation.

In his essay in *Race in Cyberspace*, David Crane writes that cyberspace is where you are when you are on the phone. He documents how the original concept underlying the term really did originate with oral technologies; many of us remember and maybe even still use dial-up connections to the Internet that were basically hacking oral technologies to produce visual and written documents on the computer desktop. I think that we privilege the visual and the written for the same reasons that we always have; as visual culture scholars like to repeat, textuality has always been privileged in relation to visuality since it signifies cultural privilege. The word is for “educated” people.

It’s unfortunate that critical media theory has not really effectively taken up the issue of the cell phone. I heard David Morley give a talk on the topic at a symposium at Northwestern last spring called “Electronic Elsewheres” that started this conversation, but I have not yet heard it continued. Social scientists are looking at it but I have not heard of or seen anything truly paradigm shifting, creative, or interesting. The popular press, like the Circuits section of the *New York Times* and the Marketplace section of the *Wall Street Journal*, are doing a better job than scholars are of considering the cultural impact of cell phones. And why is this? I think that the cell phone defies “reading,” and for textual scholars and others trained in reading as a mode of understanding a cultural object, this renders it somewhat impenetrable.

As we mentioned earlier, visual interfaces are especially privileged in new media theory, and cell phone graphical interfaces are not particularly interesting to scholars, perhaps because they are so small. Right now, however, I’m writing a book chapter on the use of AIM buddy icons and how their smallness or miniaturization creates a new fetish of possession and consumption. Visual interfaces are also generally textbased and not especially iconographic yet, which makes them hard to read. They remain fairly obdurate and inscrutable, yet they are ubiquitous. What a great topic for someone to think some deep thoughts about. Maybe it could be talked about in a lot of the ways that we talk about IM (another undertheorized Internet activity) because it has some textual elements, some graphical elements, a scripted quality, an unscripted quality, a form, and then there is the aspect of sound, which needs to be talked about separately. My friend Jonathan Sterne has done fantastic work on digital sound, and I encourage everyone to look at it.

NOTE

A longer version of this interview was first posted on the nettime list on May 25, 2004, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-0405/msg00057.html>.