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Is the Internet Colorblind?

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I was counting T-cells on the shores of cyberspace and feeling some despair… I stand at the threshold of cyberspace and wonder, is it possible that I am unwelcome here, too? Will I be allowed to construct a virtual reality that empowers me? Can invisible men see their own reflections? I'm carrying trauma into cyberspace—violent gestures, a fractured soul, short fuses, dreams of revenge… All this confusion is accompanying me into cyberspace; every indignity and humiliation, every anger and suspicion.

—Essex Hemphill,
"On the Shores of Cyberspace" *Black Nations/Queer Nations*?

On November 11, 1994, Pedro Zamora, a cast member of MTV's *The Real World: San Francisco*, died of complications from HIV/AIDS at the age of 22, one day after the season's final episode aired. As one of seven roommates picked to have their lives taped "to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real," Zamora showed firsthand what life was like as an openly gay Cuban-American AIDS activist, and he often said, "I'm a person living with AIDS, and I'll be living with AIDS until I take my last breath" (quoted in Aaron, 1). Zamora is widely credited for challenging the invisibility of Latinos, queers, and people with AIDS in the media, and in "A Tribute to Pedro Zamora," a special aired on MTV, Bill Clinton remarked, "Over the past few years, Pedro became a member of all of our families. Now no one in America can say they've never known someone who is living with AIDS." Though most viewers of *The Real World: San Francisco* did not know Zamora personally, Clinton's remarks suggest that the shared experience of watching his struggles and joys on television gave us an insight into the lives of all people living with AIDS and thus challenged us to continue Zamora's work. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, "Zamora was more than simply represented; he used MTV as an opportunity to continue his life's work of HIV/AIDS pedagogy, queer education, and human rights activism. Unlike his queer predecessors [on *The Real World*], he exploited MTV in politically efficacious ways; he used MTV more than it used him" (183). While we could certainly argue the extent to which the lives of people with AIDS have improved since 1994, I'd like to use Zamora's strategic use of television media, Clinton's insistence that television somehow made AIDS knowable to the American public, and poet Essex Hemphill's wariness of cyberspace to start a discussion about the role of technologies in challenging racial, gendered, and sexual stereotypes. As we dialogue about what "too much information" means, let's ask the following questions: Does having an abundance of information about race, gender, and sexuality change the decisions we make about their importance? How does having instant access to people from all over the world impact the ways we experience our own social location and our beliefs about others? How does our culture foster an online environment of misinformation? Finally, how might we use cyberspace to theorize these issues?

To be a No-body

The utopian vision of cyberspace as a site where we can be free of bodily limitations is what William Gibson calls a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation" (69). Cyberspace creates a feeling of being connected with, yet highly suspicious of, other users. Cyberspace requires that we believe strongly in the ability of (supposed) anonymity and disembodiment to foster more honest conversation. When we're online, we don't see color, gender, sexuality, or other identities. The Internet is the ultimate colorblind society. Why then, should Essex Hemphill be worried about not being accepted? Why does he worry that his invisibility in American culture will be extended into cyberculture? These questions speak to the problem of theorizing cyberspace as a raceless, genderless utopia.

Critical race and feminist theorists have argued that the desire for a colorblind society, one in which we don't see color, is racialized. While the history of colorblindness is outside the scope of this paper, I'll say here that a desire to fight racism and treat everyone equally can often take the form of saying that race doesn't matter (at least, not the way it did back in the bad old days). We should all see one another as people, not as races. To this point, legal scholar Patricia Williams writes, "But much is overlooked in the move to undo that which clearly and unfortunately matters just by labeling it that which 'makes no difference.' The dismissiveness, however unintentional, leaves those in [that] position pulled between the clarity of their own experience and the often alienating terms in which they must seek social acceptance."

> There's a lot of that in the world right now: someone has just announced in no uncertain terms that he or she hates you because you're dark, let's say, or Catholic or a woman or the wrong height, and the panicked authority figures try to patch things up by reassuring you that race or gender, or stature or your heartfelt religion doesn't matter; means nothing in the calculation of your humanity; is the most insignificant little puddle of beans in the world (4).

A desire to escape race by taking refuge online, then, is a misguided endeavor. Having a space where you can represent yourself as not dark, female, or Catholic does not make these categories less real. In fact, having the desire to leave these behind shows the power that they have in our culture. We can't not see them; we can't see beyond them. In reality, we do not leave our bodies behind when we engage in discussions of race online, and we should question our desire to label our identity categories as problems.

Spaces and Faces

How then can we use critical race theory to interrogate our online representations? New research on cyberspace has begun to answer this question. S. Craig Watkins, a professor of media studies and a blogger, studies the movement of college students from MySpace to Facebook over a four-year period from 2005 to 2009 (97). His research found that people between the ages of 15 and 24 spend most of their online time on social networking sites. In a study of white college students' uses of Facebook and MySpace, Watkins found that the same racialized language used to differentiate between safe and unsafe people and communities was used to describe Facebook and MySpace. His interviewees described MySpace as "uneducated, trashy, ghetto, crowded, and [filled with] predators," while Facebook received terms like "selective, clean, educated, and trustworthy" (80, 83). Watkins found that students were very uncomfortable with the wide diversity of MySpace profiles; Watkins theorizes that the students associate MySpace with uneducated and unemployed people who have the luxury of continually tweaking their profiles while Facebook's uniformity connotes upward mobility and professionalism. According to him, our increasingly digital age has not promoted a radically antiracist agenda. "Indeed, the young people [he] surveyed and spoke with are attracted to online communities that connect them to people who are like them in some notable way" (97). Despite the Internet's ability to connect us with people from around the world, attitudes about people of other races and classes shape our experiences of cyberspace.

These online interactions suggest a fascinating dynamic for those of us in cultural studies: the distinction between the Internet as an egalitarian space in which users are liberated from the confines of their bodies and one which is uniquely qualified to assert and solidify racial identities and divisions. Most students today consider e-mailing, text messaging, chatting, and blogging a vital means of self-expression and a central part of their social lives. Like other social forces, technology plays a powerful part in our racial and gender formations; let us, like Zamora, use the Internet strategically, as a means for enhancing and strengthening community, rather than transcending identity. I hope that this paper raises conversations about how we decide to live out our social divisions in online environments.

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