

Chapter 12

Veganporn.com & “Sistah”: Explorations of Whiteness through Textual Linguistic Cyberminstrelsy on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Cyberspace can be a central site for excavating the invisibility of covert whiteness (a tacit form of racialized consciousness), which does not manifest itself at the surface level in the same overt manner that extreme white cyber hate “imagined communities” do. Through the application of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist methodology-based discursive analysis, this chapter investigates performances of whiteness in a vegan/animal-rights-oriented website called Veganporn.com. As a progressive forum associated with social justice, Veganporn.com provides a radically different environment in which to examine white supremacist ideologies; ideologies typically found in more overtly-racist, “extremist” online dialogues already examined by critical research. Discourse analysis of a specific Veganporn.com forum topic revealed three major themes in the computer-mediated discussion: (1) discursive patrolling of epistemic borders to “protect” Standard English and colorblind expressions (whiteness) of veganism/animal rights from non-Standard English and non-white racialized expressions; (2) the use of blackface cyber-minstrelsy to reinforce the “superiority” of Standard English (whiteness) over the “inferiority” of speakers of Black English and Ebonics; (3) the premise among several white-identified Veganporn.com participants that a vegan- and animal-rights ideology is “colorblind” thus making invisible the current socio-historical implications of power structures created around white skin color. Though this chapter focuses on one discussion within a forum, the analysis of this event offers insight relevant to understanding whiteness as a system, an ideology, and a structure. Specifically, by employing certain theoretical components of critical race studies (racialized consciousness, social ontology of whiteness, and racial mapping), my analysis reveals how the World Wide Web can be an effective site for cyber-ethnographers focusing on “decoding” whiteness within progressive social justice movements.

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INTRODUCTION

In their seminal book, *Race in Cyberspace*, cyberspace researchers Kolko et al (2000), and Nakamura (2002) argue that not only is race often difficult to talk about in the academy, such difficulty (and often refusal) to talk about it manifests frequently within the realm of cyberspaces that consciously try to avoid it. In the words of UCLA Law professor, Jerry Kang, “Can cyberspace change the very way that race structures our daily lives? Cyberspace enables new forms of social interaction. How might these new communicative forms affect racial mechanics?” (Kang 2000, p. 1133). Furthermore, how does discourse analysis of digital rhetoric help researchers of critical race theory or anti-racist praxis, understand systemic whiteness, racism, or utopian dreams of cyberspace being a “post-racial” space?

Tara McPherson argues in her study of Neo-Confederate websites, that even deliberate and conscious efforts to elide questions of race online can manage to create unmistakably racialized spaces...[her work shows that the] virtual reality that is cyberspace has often been construed as something that exists in binary opposition to “the real world”, but when it comes to questions of power, politics, and structural relations, cyberspace is as real as it gets. (Kolko et. al 2000, p. 4)

Nakamura (2002) concurs that raceless or post-racial, as concepts in cyberspace, equate to a default racial identity of “white.” Research focused on constructions of raceless or post-racial cyberspace utopias- particularly amongst white identified users involved in progressive social justice movements, is a realm in need of further exploration (Banks 2006 ; Kolko et al 2000; Nakamura 2002). Yancy (2004) notes that most research about whiteness and racial discrimination is focused on the limited binary of “good whites” versus “bad whites” (i.e. “bad whites” equals engagement in overtly White Supremacist practices,

such as the KKK or neo-Nazi group activity). This chapter will explore how discourse analysis of digital rhetoric, in one specific computer-mediated progressive “post-racial” forum, a) deconstructs the simplicity of white supremacist ideologies as part of the good/bad binary and b) reveals the illusion of post-racial or raceless cyberspaces.

METHODOLOGY

It is through the analysis of performance through language, via a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist discursive analytical framework, that I will show how systemic whiteness/white supremacist ideologies are manifested on a site dedicated to the discussion of veganism and animal rights. I have selected this topic because culturally in the West, collectively whites that practice such activism think they are incapable of participating in the overt racism one can normally find on radical right extremist white cyber hate Internet sites (Poldervaart 2001; Clark 2004). Yancy (2004) explains that white supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, are collectively viewed by liberal progressive whites as the “real racists.” Deeper explorations of progressive whites’ own potential racism is “non-applicable” because “acts of racism” are viewed and compared to these “extreme” hate groups (Yancy 2004):

A key feature of the social ontology of whiteness is that whites attempt to avoid discussing their own social, political, economic, and cultural investments in whiteness. Many whites fail to see their complicity with the systemic workings of white supremacy. By perpetuating the dualism between the “good white” and the “bad white,” whites attempt to mute the claim that white racism is not limited to the KKK, neo-Nazis skinheads, White Aryan Resistance, and other white racists groups... (Yancy 2004, p. 4)

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