

## The Future of (the) "Race": Identity, Discourse, and the Rise of Computer-mediated Public Spheres

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Pretend you are a white person. Hmmm . . . Yahoo chat sites, Excite, Globe, noooo . . . I think I'll go to Asian Avenue. Why? Because I want to learn Asian culture, of course. . . . How about the forums? The only thing a white person will contribute is a posting that will defend their position or undermine anything that would not be in their best interests, whether it helps Asians or not. Often they will appeal to an idealistic logic that has no basis in the real world. I think the minds and opinions of Asians are diverse enough to provide opposing views in all forums. So why are white people here? What do you think? My personal view is to let them hit on the girls. However, they should not be in the forums because they contribute NOTHING to the forum, except to taint the forums with their own self-serving ideas. Hell, they already got control of the media, is there any way for an Asian to express their [sic] ideas to other Asians without a white person corrupting the exchange of ideas?

—Delpi<sup>1</sup>

The quotation above was taken from an April 2000 discussion thread on AsianAvenue.com, an Asian American Web site that serves as one of the most popular online social networks for the Asian diaspora. This polemical posting, contributed under the pseudonym "Delpi,"<sup>2</sup> though not unique in its subject matter, articulates Delpi's sense that AsianAvenue represents an Asian public sphere—an imaginary borderless place superimposed on "real" Web space. By questioning the motives of white participants, who are perceived as "corrupting the exchange of ideas," Delpi appeals to members of his community who, by virtue of being racial citizens, would likely share in the notion that this immaterial territory should be marked and defended. In fact, Delpi expresses a desire to ensure that the exchange of ideas remains pure, or at least racially honest and "authentic," by virtue of limiting the dialogue to its "real" citizens. Delpi's protective impulse is rather common in such discussion forums, where participation by racial others—particularly whites—is often viewed as an effort to thwart "nation" (and movement) building, identity formation, belonging, and ownership.

The forum is a locus of community vitality on such racially dedicated sites. Their discussion threads serve as relatively permanent recorded instances of discourse production, and they are central to public life as they offer members the unique opportunity to react and respond to a myriad of globally relevant and racially specific topics. Despite the popular claim that the Internet presents the possibility of a raceless space, participation on dedicated sites is growing exponentially. That just three of the most trafficked—AsianAvenue.com, BlackPlanet.com, and MiGente.com—are home to more than 16 million subscribers<sup>3</sup> suggests that the dissolution of racial identification in cyberspace is neither possible nor *desirable*.

Theorizing about the ways in which dedicated sites serve as informal learning environments makes the case for studying them even more compelling, especially for minority

youths. To understand more about what participants learn and teach each other about race and ethnicity online, this chapter focuses on the exchange of ideas, and public Discourse,<sup>4</sup> on dedicated Web sites. I explore prevailing views about race by analyzing the rhetorical dynamics of more than 3,000 discussion threads in the Heritage and Identity forums on AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente. Drawn from data accumulated over a seven-year period (August 1999 to August 2006), the analysis shows (1) how online communities are giving rise to new collective subjectivities unfolding across local, national, and international lines; (2) how real-world forces, such as the shift in racial tensions post-9/11, contribute to renewed commitments to racial identification and anti-imperialism; and (3) how these discourses accept and reject racial typologies. There are three parts to this chapter. The first part addresses the current impact of computer-mediated networks and new media on the development of dedicated public spheres online and youth participation therein. The second part presents an analysis of race-related discussion threads and is guided by a Critical Language Studies<sup>5</sup> framework, one that helps to illustrate the often hidden connections between language, power, and ideology.<sup>6</sup> The third part considers the role ongoing participation plays in the ways young people teach–learn about race and ethnicity.

When we consider the significant role played by online forums, listservs, and other computer-mediated social networks in the lives of minority youths, this phenomenon of dedicated sites takes on new meaning. This is especially pertinent given the desirability of youths as target markets for these Internet companies. Community Connect, Inc. (CCI), is the parent company of AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente. CCI's first site, AsianAvenue, was introduced in 1997, and in less than two years it became the leading Asian American Web site, garnering more than 2.2 million members by March 2002.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this success, BlackPlanet was launched in September 1999. In the first year, more than 1 million members joined BlackPlanet, and by April 2002 its community expanded to 5.3 million users.<sup>8</sup> Both AsianAvenue and BlackPlanet have consistently ranked among the highest trafficked sites for their respective ethnic markets. The third site, MiGente, was launched in October 2000, and is considered the most popular English-language community for Latinos. More than 500,000 members registered within the first two years.<sup>9</sup>

At the time of this writing, AsianAvenue had about 1.4 million members, BlackPlanet about 14.9 million, and MiGente about 2.5 million. Though the company does not release any statistics about its users, changes to platform design, special features, and advertisers over the years suggests that their interest is in appealing to a primarily sixteen- to twenty-four-year-old ethnic base. Advertisements and sponsorships have come from JCrew, Disney, Sony, Miramax Films, college preparation resource the Princeton Review, and the U.S. Army. Features have included dating subscription services, early career job searches in partnership with Monster.com, modeling discovery opportunities with Ford Models, and exclusive music content from singers like Janet Jackson, Mario Vasquez, and Enrique Iglesias, as well as rappers P. Diddy and Ludacris. Taking the largest share of the e-commerce pie among ethnic social networking companies, CCI expected to net about \$20 million in revenues across all three sites in 2006, of which 15 percent was expected to come from its dating services, 50 percent from advertising, and 35 percent from job notices.<sup>10</sup>

As impressive as CCI's stake is in the young online ethnic market, some might consider participation in any one of the organization's sites a bit passé, given the current media and critical attention focused on the more recent crop of mainstream sites such MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook. Noted for their innovations in attracting mainstream youth, these more popular social networks have been so successful that any one of them has a membership

base that is at least double the size of the three CCI sites combined. So marginalized is CCI from discussions on the impact of social networking on our youth, even on minority youth, that in a September 2006 BusinessWeek.com article, one media expert erroneously pegged CCI (launched in 1997) as at the forefront of the "second wave" of social networking sites, while naming Friendster (launched in 2002) as an example of a "first wave" site.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, popularity and participation on the three CCI sites seemed to have peaked back in 2002. At that time, its largest site, BlackPlanet, had daily participation averaging in the millions. Today its figures are somewhere in the thousands of daily users. Likewise, the \$20 million in revenues that places Community Connect in the top three of the social networking companies (based on sales) is all but a blip on NewsCorp/MySpace's \$327-million radar. But when it comes to longevity, sustaining an interactive community, and the ability to continue recruiting younger participants over a seven-plus-year span, CCI seems to have figured out what some critics see as the real challenge facing those popular "first wave" sites.<sup>12</sup>

The ongoing Web presence in the lives of more than 16 million young Asian, black, and Latino users means that the CCI sites have become established pillars of their respective communities rather than the latest fads with unpredictable futures. These sites represent relatively stable homes for their target users; whether they are long-time members or are newly emerging voices, holding membership on at least one of the CCI sites is likely. This ongoing Web presence also means that these dedicated sites can serve as valuable resources for understanding the ways in which ethnic communities construct, stabilize, modify, and challenge individual and community senses of identity over a relatively long period of time. It must be noted that there are few other Web communities out there that can provide researchers with opportunities for exploring the ways in which sustained online interaction impacts a community's ideas about nation, culture, race, and ethnicity, much less those that are organized around youth expressions of these issues. In this sense, CCI sites bear as much relevance on these *au courant* discussions about youth participation on social networking sites as do MySpace and the others. Given that race and ethnicity are the principal features around which public life is organized on AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente, it is critical that scholarship begins to pay attention to the variety of ways young people publicly engage with concepts like these, especially with respect to the diasporic interconnectedness that such sites offer.

Ironically, the relative anonymity of dedicated sites like CCI's may be one of the key reasons they continue to thrive. Recent work by Vorris Nunley posits that unmonitored and unrestricted quasi-public places like African American barbershops and beauty salons, sites of what he calls African American hush harbor rhetoric, serve as important spaces for the production and exchange of community-centered knowledges.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the term *hush harbor* refers to the places where slaves gathered to participate in various aspects of public life, hidden, unnoticed, and especially inaudible to their white masters. As Nunley argues, the hushedness ensured the survival of this form of African American publicness and the rhetorical practices that serviced it.<sup>14</sup> Drawing loose parallels with Nunley's notion of hush harbor rhetoric, these little theorized dedicated sites that fly well below the mainstream radar have also, for years, been developing a sense of group cohesion and rhetorical practices that members perceive as being very valuable to their online lives because they are relatively free of *mass* participation by ethnic outsiders.

The importance of racially "pure" public spaces is an aspect of community life that CCI participants are especially not afraid to talk about. As Delpi so aptly describes in the posting quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the site is premised on an exchange of ideas in

a specialized public sphere where racial identity serves as common ground for participants and as a primary determinant of one's right to participate. In this way, dedicated Web sites can be thought of as imaginary public spheres that overcome the complexities of real-world distancing by using computer-mediated technologies to cultivate critical spaces for discursive exchange.

Because this chapter proceeds from the perspective that discourse is governed by social practice, the primary concern of this study is analyzing the relationship between texts, processes, and social conditions as reflective of "both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures."<sup>15</sup> I believe that the application of a critical language theory is an essential tool for investigating the intersection between race, representation, and the production of social knowledge. Of equal importance are the ways in which online discourses intersect with young users, and addressing the dearth of research and critical analyses of the ways in which participants, the majority of whom are likely to be 16–24, articulate race and social interaction. The goal is to provide valuable insights into the disjunctures between local, national, and international identifications, which are essential for new thinking about intersections between globalization and diaspora cultures, and their relevance for youths of color.

### Part I: New Media Publicness

Latino, contrary to popular belief, is not a racial group. But yet, when referred to it is always put in comparison to racial groups such as whites, blacks, or asians [*sic*]. But Latinos come in all racial groups, from the average Negra in Santiago de Cuba to the indigenous peoples of Peru to its former Japanese President Fujimori. It seems every other day I get that annoying question: "What are you?" Well, human of course. My nationality? Well, American, born and raised. "No, I mean, really, what are you?" What question is really being asked here? Does the spanish [*sic*] I speak change who I am? Does the cinnamon skin determine my personality or my capacity to learn and achieve? I am a mixture of many things, but I will always be me. So tell me, what are you really???? —labellalatina1001<sup>16</sup>

For MiGente's labellalatina1001 (name changed), the fundamental question, "What are you?" is as personal as it is communal. The seemingly individual and self-reflective question, one that considers the relevance of race to her personality, also addresses the tensions between history, culture, nationhood, and identity formation. Notice that even though she is frustrated with the limitations of race as a means of grouping and categorizing others, she still begins her question by asserting its naturalness. As she explores the layers of her identity, labellalatina1001 offers potential respondents an outline of the methodological implications of the question. In fact, by wondering about the connection between country and culture or skin color, personality and intelligence, labellalatina1001 articulates not only the richness of her racial identification but also its potential inadequateness. By structuring the question in this manner, the series of responses is inclined to engage with the history of (their) "race" and the interplay of dominant ideologies.

From the ongoing reverberations of Trujillo's reign in the Dominican Republic to the destructiveness of intraracial hate, respondents also present several theories about how the members of the community should conceptualize their race. Interestingly, most users' initial posts contextualize their personal experiences—signifying their degree of authenticity and authority—by describing their skin color, their bloodline, or their familiarity with back home (food, music, visiting every summer). In so doing, users rarely questioned another's right to contribute to the dialogue, whether or not they agreed with the one who thought

"we are all African cuz [*sic*] we got the African blood," or whether they applauded the one who proclaimed, in all caps, "WE ARE [OUR] OWN RACE!!!!!"<sup>17</sup> In integrating various aspects of personal and community history, participants construct a framework for engaging with their Latinoness.<sup>18</sup> That this dialogue generated some forty-seven pages of threaded discussion and was sustained for more than a year, with members continually revising their definitions, indicates that their sense of Latinoness is neither bound to group consensus nor is it completely independent of it.

This dialogue is but one example of how online community forums serve as vital public spaces<sup>19</sup> for (re)thinking and (re)producing social knowledge and why new theorizing about new media publicness is necessary. Remarking on the relevance of poststructuralist theorists like Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, and Guattari to digital media analysis, noted scholar Sherry Turkle observed that, as online interactions increasingly move us away from the computer's information-gathering purpose, the boundaries between real and virtual have become blurred, if not irrelevant.<sup>20</sup> Her study of Internet identity exemplifies what the French scholars named above meant when they argued that the self and other—fluid, unstable, and reflexive—are constituted in language. According to this position, language affects the character of human consciousness and conditions as it is conditioned by users' experiences.

So even when free to make up any identity online as Turkle discusses, the discourse that makes the characters real or "authentic" is inevitably structured by an interplay of sociocultural forces. As Lisa Nakamura shows, when white users play Asian characters in online games, they engage in a form of cyber tourism that is often guided by centuries-long Western fantasies of the exotic Oriental other.<sup>21</sup> In terms of poststructuralist theory, racial identity (or any form of identity, for that matter) is not a universal reality; rather, it is a sequence of intersecting rhetorics, each articulating some existing social knowledge. Like scripts, or what Stuart Hall describes as a "common sense" within culture, the ideologies undergirding such knowledge prescribe how users think, act, and function, the roles they play, the assumptions they make, and the ways in which they interpret and understand lived experiences.<sup>22</sup>

For more than fifteen years, a small group of academics has been writing about the intricacies of identity formation and community building online.<sup>23</sup> From Howard Rheingold's notion of the Internet as a virtual community to Anna Everett's early attention to the role networked connectivity might play for the black public sphere, this emerging discourse about race and ethnicity in online discourse questions how offline realities condition users online. But with the Internet and cyberlife now well into their teenage years, scholarship is increasingly faced with the implications of online realities conditioning users in the world offline. Waning in popularity is Sherry Turkle's view that users' online worlds are parallel with their offline worlds.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars, like Emily Noelle Ignacio, contend that Turkle's use of the term *parallel* gives the false impression that users engage in community and communication practices that are completely apart from their "real" lives, much like the way parallel lines in a diagram never touch one another.<sup>25</sup> Preferring the term *perpendicular* instead, Ignacio suggests that, because many Internet communities are also home to "real" offline communities<sup>26</sup>—as would clearly be the case for Asian-, black-, and Latino-targeted sites—these worlds are more likely to connect with each other than they are to be absolutely distinct. Serving as extensions of and intersections with each other, social and community-based interaction in both worlds play significant roles in shaping the identities of their users.

As we know well, the social and community-based dimension of the Internet has been flourishing for quite some time. From classmates.com (founded in 1995) to the MySpace

boom in 2005, belonging to a social networking community has characterized much of the online experience, so much so that MySpace is known as “one of the major destinations on the Web” and has become a real competitor for the likes of MSN, Yahoo! and AOL.<sup>27</sup> When the site received more page views in 2005 than search engine giant Google, some bloggers humorously quipped that MySpace should launch its own record label and vie for world—aka media—domination.<sup>28</sup> In an almost prophetic turn later that year, MySpace, with Rupert Murdoch at the helm, announced its partnership with Interscope Records and the launch of a record label.<sup>29</sup> As MySpace CEO Chris Wolfe stated, “It’s become a lot more than just a website. It’s become a lifestyle brand.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, MySpace has become a lifestyle, with more than 80 million registered users and the resources to impact consumer and market interests alike. Further indicative of MySpace eclipsing a *mere* Web presence is its August 2006 partnership with Google. As Fox executives report, the typical reason users leave MySpace is to use a search engine, so by providing onsite googling capabilities, MySpace would be able to retain participation for longer periods of time and, of course, increase marketing potential. Evidently, there is immense value in sustaining online communities, as news of this deal drove both Google and NewsCorps market price up.<sup>31</sup>

In many ways, social networking sites like these straddle the debate between a viable youth-centered public sphere and a calculated corporate venture.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, the popularity of these sites translates into vibrant communities with strong communications networks, especially through the use of tools such as instant messengers, chatrooms, Weblogs, and discussion boards that, among other things, increase the rapidity of discursive exchange. On the other hand, there are the commercial interests and the efforts to appeal to the broadest base of participants. When MySpace’s Wolfe remarked that “radio has become less and less important,”<sup>33</sup> perhaps the only truism behind such a statement is that the decline in radio listenership is indicative of the audience’s taste for real-time dialoguing and consumer-controlled content.

On social networking sites, community members serve both as producers and consumers, and have an equal ability to influence and to be heard. As Kollock notes, online participants are generally motivated by the anticipation of reciprocity, the opportunity to build their reputations and the reputations of the sites, and the sense that their contributions directly affect the pulse of the community.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on Rheingold’s notion that the Internet is a gift economy,<sup>35</sup> Kollock explains that, in addition to the gratification of helping to build the site’s culture, users are rewarded with full rights of access.<sup>36</sup> In this way, pride of membership is also about being an active producer as opposed to a passive or irrelevant consumer. But filling out demographic profiles, providing e-mail addresses, accepting cookies, and, in some cases, selecting from a list of potential advertisers (as is the case for joining BlackPlanet and MiGente), has become part and parcel of the gift exchange of this social experience. As the commercial stakes in online communities rise, so too will the interest in directing the attention of participants, or controlling the format of interaction, to suit the profit-making agendas of corporate partners. Nonetheless, the promise of new media publicness is compelling.

Functioning as vibrant public spaces—imagined territories developed by CCI made real in typed discursive exchanges—participants, who are stripped of their local exigencies, shape online communities to sometimes reflect, refine, reject, and reproduce social knowledge as informed by their offline experiences.<sup>37</sup> But new media publics also proffer well-defined discourse communities based around the sensibility of a purely online aesthetic with grammars of communication that dictate much more than when to use ROFL or LOL.<sup>38</sup> With the

expectation of civic engagement and the de-centering of an absolute information source, the traditional sense of consensus is eroded, and is certainly not a prerequisite to community development. Aside from the obvious trend in establishing social communities, there is an additional effort toward sustaining them. First, sustaining refers to the effort to keep participants logged on and active for longer periods of time; this, in turn, increases the rate and quality of fresh content. Second, sustaining also refers to the longevity of the community on the whole. As noted before, some communities have maintained Web presences for more than ten years. While it may be too early to predict the material impact of these long-term Web cultures, the desire to carve out online niches, to territorialize Web space, and to commit to preserving them, speaks to the most basic need to stake out turf and plant roots.

More than a decade ago, some scholars were declaring that increasing trends toward globalization have dissolved territories,<sup>39</sup> that national borders have become immaterial, superfluous, or superseded;<sup>40</sup> that nationally organized politico-cultural identities are being "deterritorialized";<sup>41</sup> and that "supraterritorial" spaces based upon "distanceless, borderless interactions"<sup>42</sup> are de-centering the role of territorial and place-based socio-institutional forms. But this new media publicness and the overwhelming popularity of online communities is unequivocally tied to creating and defining borders, if only symbolically, and publicly laying claims to distinct identities. Signs of territory, and the accompanying rhetorics of "nation building," are more visible than ever.

My own recent experience lurking in a black chatroom on Yahoo! made it clear just how territorialized certain Web spheres have become. When a participant posted messages in Arabic, several members "shouted" (using a big font) to either stop or leave the chatroom because he had "no business speaking where you don't belong." Another remarked, "Why come online if no one can't understand you. Makes no sense [*sic*]." <sup>43</sup> Angered over a breakdown in the exchange of ideas—the centerpiece of social networking—English-speaking members readily identified the poster as an outsider who likely had no real right to participate in that dialogue, and perhaps even on the English-language-dominated "World" Wide Web. That the poster could very well have been black did not seem to be important enough to grant him access, since—for these participants—a "real" community is clearly forged out of a common tongue. Though not deliberately intending to refer to a historically racialized term, the "tribal" impulse and the subsequent territorial responses exhibited here are difficult to ignore. As will be explored later in this chapter, instances where Asian, black, or Latino members vilify a common enemy—particularly white participants, as representatives of white power structures—are fairly prevalent on dedicated sites.

Though it can be tempting to reduce these discourses to reverse racism or to make the claim that participants on dedicated sites tend to be racist (as is sometimes the position held by outsiders), more careful analysis shows that participants are much more concerned with the ways outside voices can affect public dialogues than they are about these individuals having access to the sites. In fact, it is the outsider's motivation for contributing to this aspect of community life that is most scrutinized—treated with suspicion—because many see these discussions as intimately connected with the future of (the) race. As the analysis in Part II of this chapter shows, public life is organized around rich dialogues about the myriad of ways racial identity guides community life online. The effect of whiteness, ideologically and materially, is but a small part of it.

Everett's postulations about black public life online shows that, among other things, dedicated sites are being used to strengthen ties across national borders (as is exemplified in the Nigerian diaspora site Naijanet), and to support activist interests (as is demonstrated by the

ways black women used the Internet to share information about the 1997 Million Woman's March within their on- and offline communities).<sup>44</sup> In this sense, black publics online are borne out of desires to deepen interconnectivity and to use new media, whether strategic or not, for their own community-building purposes. It is important to underscore Everett's examples here because they show that, while marginalized communities are creating spaces for interaction online, raced publics are not responses to that marginalization.

In fact, the connection between Internet technologies and diasporan interconnectivity, as can be evidenced by the popularity and ongoing presence of dedicated sites, lays challenge to the centrality of generalized publicness that philosophers like John Rawls tend to privilege. Rawls argues that, in order to participate in *the* public sphere, participants must strip themselves of their private interests so that they can come to some form of consensus about issues of general concern to all.<sup>45</sup> According to him, "comprehensive doctrines" (like race or religion, for instance), are private matters that impede upon our ability to have "overlapping consensus," because such doctrines inevitably influence our ability to think or act "rationally" about collective interests.<sup>46</sup> But, as shown in the examples offered by Everett, Naijanet, and the Million Woman March, in particular, participants' raced and ethnic identities are the common ground out of which a vibrant online public life emerges. Although these participants may very well be engaged in other publics, as in the case of some MiGente members who hold memberships on MySpace, their comprehensive doctrines are neither secondary nor completely separated.<sup>47</sup> Even though participants are not drawing clear lines between "public" and "private" in the way for which Rawls has argued, the strengthening of communication networks has nonetheless created new pathways for translating such public discourse into meaningful social action.

There are some indications that one of the consequences of an online race-centered public life—activism particularly around issues of social justice—is just on the horizon. Consider that in July 2006 a coalition of black gay bloggers launched a worldwide online campaign to protest the scheduled performances by Jamaican dancehall artists Beenie Man and TOK at LIFEbeat's annual HIV/AIDS fundraising conference in New York to benefit infected people in the Caribbean.<sup>48</sup> The concert was sponsored by music powerhouses Black Entertainment Television, *Vibe Magazine*, Music Choice, and New York-based radio station Power 105.1 FM. Outraged at scheduled performances by artists who have been criticized for lyrics that call for violence against gays, the coalition posted a series of blogs on the subject and e-mailed organizers, activists, media, loyal readers, and concert organizers. Within twenty-four hours, there was intense media coverage. A few days later, efforts included a news conference at LIFEbeat headquarters, protests by leading black LGBT figures in New York, and e-mails from black gay activists in London voicing their support. By July 12, LIFEbeat canceled the concert, citing fear of violence stemming from the pressures of "a select group of activists."<sup>49</sup>

LIFEbeat's response—canceling the concert, rather than canceling those particular performances—was an unintended, albeit serious, consequence of an effort aimed at addressing what protesters truly saw as the perpetuation of intracommunity intolerance of its gay members. LIFEbeat's decision to cancel the concert must be understood as an attempt to cast blame deliberately on these activists for speaking out and as evidence of the organization's refusal to enter into (perhaps be a catalyst for) serious community dialogue about these matters. That the outcome of LIFEbeat's discursive gatekeeping was a canceled benefit concert does not negate the significance of the coalition's using its online social networks to incite civic action and bring about community change. Likewise, this example shows how strategic organizing online, coupled with diasporic interconnectedness, can potentially translate into meaningful grassroots action in just a few days. After all, the protest came from

the black American and British GLBT communities in response to performances by Jamaican dancehall artists at a benefit concert in New York for persons in the Caribbean living with HIV/AIDS.

## Part II: Heritage, Identity, and Discourses of Racial Authenticity

I don't believe that the brother was implying that anyone "smiled" as the Towers came down. If he was thinking in the same sense as I was, he probably had "raised brows" that the "chickens had come home to roost." Our government doesn't have clean hands in [foreign] policies whatsoever. We have been playing the "dozens" for quite sometime now. And now, it's ironic, that the shoe is on the other foot. It's sad that when a black man or woman gets pulled over by a police officer, he or she doesn't know [whether] or not they are going to make it home alive. Depending on what city you live in, this is a reality. In Americas [*sic*] silent war against "the boyz in the hood," we all became victims. The movie *Crash* covered this magnificently. So to see that [the] script had been flipped, and know that the white male was now the "target" of profiling, the target of his own conception, was almost like poetic justice. —MinorityReporter<sup>50</sup>

This admission from BlackPlanet's pseudonymous MinorityReporter that he has very little sympathy for (white) Americans over the 9/11 attacks sparks a rather interesting debate about the community's place in American public life. His response, and the originating question "How do you feel about another black person who had no feelings about 9/11?" also represents a rather noticeable shift in discussions around this topic.<sup>51</sup> In 2001, participants on BlackPlanet (and all three CCI sites) expressed sympathy, fear, and a sense of allegiance with the United States. But today those expressions tend to ebb and flow between suspicion and disinterest. (In 2005, no threads on MiGente or BlackPlanet acknowledged 9/11.) When participants talk about 9/11, it is frequently the source of intense debate as to whether this really is "family business." Although some participants support the troops and were saddened by 9/11, many note that their empathy was heightened only as a result of being made aware of the deaths of "innocent black people." When ShugaSuga is incensed by the feeling that blacks are siding with "the terrorists" who "hate white America," she reminds them that "anyone of us could have died in that [terrorist] attack," and that mourning with the nation does not detract from "the knowledge of 'self' and the hardships in this society."<sup>52</sup> Her response is a useful counter to MinorityReporter's view that (black) family business is distinct from American business. ShugaSuga offers participants a way of intertwining them, especially given the longstanding contributions that African Americans have made. Furthermore, she cautions her family to be wary of siding with those who:

don't care about what happened to us [during] slavery and [Jim Crow] . . . they don't care about Black [people] at all . . . they hate America . . . and as far as they are concerned we are part of America . . . they didn't send out a memo for all the Black people to stay home so that only whites got killed . . . they attacked our country and they are the enemy . . . period.<sup>53</sup>

Noting that there is a significant difference between being allies in the fight against social and economic problems blacks face and the killing of thousands of Americans who likely played no role in the injustice they suffer, ShugaSuga's post inevitably alters the tone of the discussion from one that was previously unsympathetic to one that encourages patriotism and sympathy, even in spite of the injustices done unto black people.

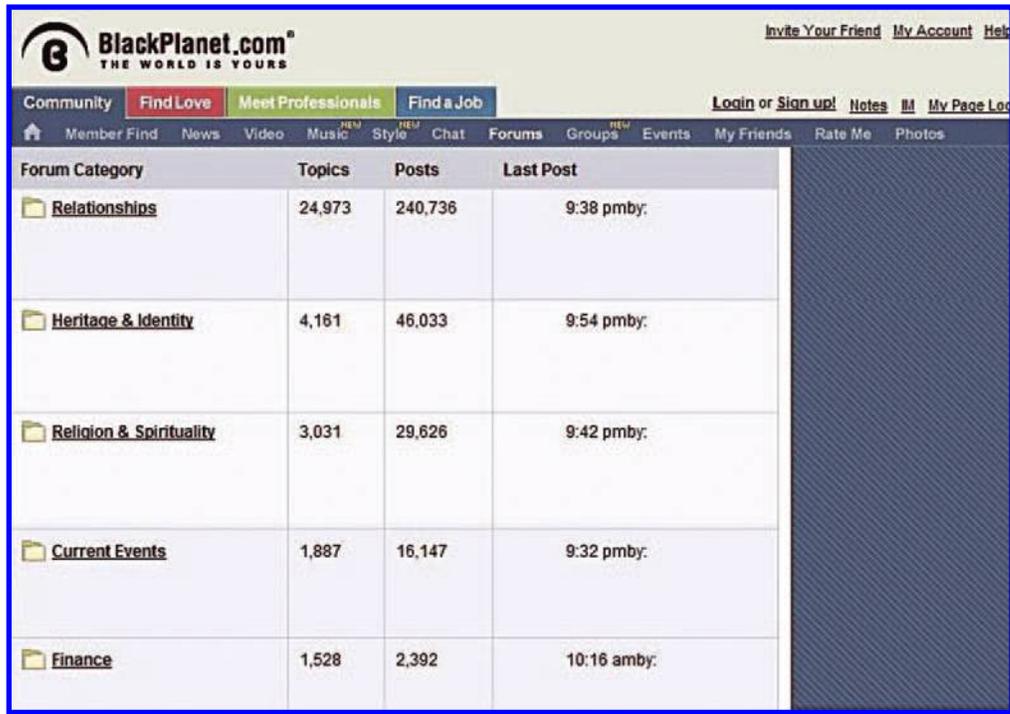
In the example above and the ones at the beginning of each section of this chapter, my analyses and observations are informed by critical theory, to underscore the intersection

between the creation and dispersion of social knowledge about race and ethnicity online. In an environment where a fundamental component of online life for these young people is discourse about race, new knowledge is constituted both by individual and by institutional interpretations of these notions. In light of this complex discursive context, my recourse to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a methodological tool in Critical Language Studies, is used to call attention to some of the often hidden connections between language, power, and ideology. In this way, the application of CDA allows us to interrogate further the intersection between online discursive events (or conversations) and participants' larger sociocultural positions. In so doing, one can better understand the ways in which communities pass along ideas about themselves and how they mask or make ideological norms more transparent.

Thus, there are two underlying theoretical assumptions at work when we approach texts from a CDA position. First, because online discursive interactions are also sites of social interaction, they must be understood as *reflections* of a "knowledge base" that reveals larger offline social structures, situations, and norms about language and language use. Second, these knowledge bases are sites for the *reproduction* of other social structures, situations, and norms about language and language use. In this sense, when members of an online community participate in the production of discourse, they negotiate meanings and form newer ones to suit their needs, but these discourses are never free from the cultural norms and histories to which participants are bound. As Potter and Wetherell note, critical analysis of a discursive event isn't as much about the content as it is about the interpretations of it.<sup>54</sup> Thus, a critical approach allows us to appreciate the development of new forms of discourse while still interrogating the conditions under which longstanding ideologies are reproduced and maintained throughout.

Norman Fairclough's approach to CDA is most instructive here, and provides clear and useful analytical strengths for understanding the power of dedicated sites for youths and the larger racialized online communities.<sup>55</sup> His is a three-step method that involves describing the linguistic features within the text, interpreting the relationships between the discursive processes and that of the text, and, finally, explaining the relationships between discursive processes and larger social processes.<sup>56</sup> Rather than explain and address each of the steps individually, as is fairly standard in CDA, this section presents some of the illustrative findings from my seven-year case study, so as to underscore the dominant rhetorical strategies and techniques, themes, and ideologies with which young people can expect to engage when they are in dialogue about race and ethnicity on dedicated sites. My research findings suggest that (1) there is a relationship between topic titles, participation rate, and age of participants in the Heritage and Identity forum; (2) race-based essentialism operates more as an implicit element in these dialogues and is rejected outright when made explicit; (3) knowledge of the community's history is used to establish one's authority and authenticity, and in many cases history is treated uncritically like the physical sciences (as immutably factual, objective, and free from interpretation); and (4) a healthy sense of racial identity is one of the key parameters based on which participants are judged.

To better understand the role that discussions of race and ethnicity play on these sites, samples of exchanges in the Heritage and Identity message board forums were used exclusively.<sup>57</sup> A total of 3,027 threaded forum messages were considered for this particular analysis. This accounted for 415 messages on Asian Avenue, 1,735 messages of BlackPlanet, and 877 messages on MiGente. All the data were analyzed over time according to CDA, with multiple critical readings over time for the purpose of identifying salient discursive patterns, structural features, and repetition of themes. The messages under analysis were taken from a



The screenshot shows the BlackPlanet.com website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Community', 'Find Love', 'Meet Professionals', and 'Find a Job'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with links for 'Member Find', 'News', 'Video', 'Music', 'Style', 'Chat', 'Forums', 'Groups', 'Events', 'My Friends', 'Rate Me', and 'Photos'. The main content area displays a table of forum categories with columns for 'Forum Category', 'Topics', 'Posts', and 'Last Post'. The categories listed are Relationships, Heritage & Identity, Religion & Spirituality, Current Events, and Finance. The 'Heritage & Identity' category has the highest number of posts at 46,033.

Forum Category	Topics	Posts	Last Post
<a href="#">Relationships</a>	24,973	240,736	9:38 pmby:
<a href="#">Heritage &amp; Identity</a>	4,161	46,033	9:54 pmby:
<a href="#">Religion &amp; Spirituality</a>	3,031	29,626	9:42 pmby:
<a href="#">Current Events</a>	1,887	16,147	9:32 pmby:
<a href="#">Finance</a>	1,528	2,392	10:16 amby:

Figure 1

larger pool gathered from random visits over a seven-year period.<sup>58</sup> Only those discussions that generated responses from more than five participants were considered in an effort to pay closer attention to dialogic characteristics of a particular issue. Threads with fewer than five participants did not yield as many exchanges. Rather, participants responded to the original posts without engaging with or building on the contributions of members before them. Some of these discussion threads had few participants, were flooded with advertisements, were repeat postings, or were off-topic exchanges between online friends. Similarly, because the sizes of these communities range in the millions, the volume of daily message board postings is quite considerable. Many discussion threads do not receive more than a few responses because there are so many new topics each day. In the case of current events, several threads may present the same issue, thus lowering participation across all of them.

Nonetheless, even when accounting for the participation issues described above, the Heritage and Identity forum is still the centerpiece of interaction on two of the sites. As the January 2007 screen capture from BlackPlanet shows (Figure 1), the 4,161 discussion topics located in this forum generated 46,033 responses. In comparison, the second- and third-ranked forums were Religion & Spirituality and Current Events, where the combined participation is comparable with Heritage and Identity.

This pattern is fairly similar on MiGente (Figure 2). Whereas Religion & Spirituality currently has more topics and more responses than the others, Heritage and Identity has a comparable rate of participation per thread. For example, each of the 112 topics in Heritage

The screenshot shows the MiGente.com website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Community', 'Find Love', 'Meet Professionals', and 'Find a Job'. Below this is a search bar for forums. The main content area displays a table of forum categories with columns for 'Forum Category', 'Topics', 'Posts', and 'Last Post'.

Forum Category	Topics	Posts	Last Post
Religion & Spirituality	634	3,439	7:48 pmby:
Relationships	435	1,800	6:19 pmby:
Current Events	280	1,118	7:53 pmby:
Heritage & Identity	112	728	6:13 pmby:
Music	318	432	Mar 1by:

Figure 2

and Identity that were still receiving posts in January 2007 had more than five participants. On the other hand, Religion & Spirituality had 634 topics, but many of them asked users similar questions over the course of the day or the week, and in those cases there were few or no responses.

It must be noted that AsianAvenue discontinued its message boards for reasons currently unknown to the author.<sup>59</sup> However, until 2005 (about the time it was removed), participation in the Heritage and Identity section also outnumbered that of the other forums, and was the site of participation from various ethnic groups. It is interesting to note that the AsianAvenue chatrooms, which are the only remaining places CCI provides for group interaction, separate members by ethnicity (Figure 3). For example, there is a chatroom for DESIs (i.e., South Asian descent), East Asians (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, etc.), and Filipinos. At the time of this writing, separation by ethnicity does not occur on either of the other two sites.

The most popular discussions in Heritage and Identity are those that explicitly ask questions about race or ethnicity. Appearing at least once a day, a post may ask members to relate how racial identity impacts their way of life. Not only are these threads most prevalent, but they also tend to rank highest in participation, especially when the race of the community or the group under discussion is mentioned in the thread title. For example, on BlackPlanet, when looking at two threads with the same topic like, "I'm Black and I Voted For Bush . . . Are U Crazy"<sup>60</sup> and "War,"<sup>61</sup> the originators of the threads asked essentially the same question about whether black people should support President Bush and the war in Iraq. However,



Figure 3

forty-one people responded to the post in which race was noted, and only eight responded to the post in which it was not. Similarly, of the topics generated from May to June 2006 on MiGente, each of the most popular threads included the words *Brown*, *Puerto Rican*, *Taino*, *Latino*, or *Mexican*.<sup>62</sup> On AsianAvenue, threads like "Do U Consider Hmong to be like us?"<sup>63</sup> "Filipinos: Latino or Asian?"<sup>64</sup> and "What makes DESIs Asians?"<sup>65</sup> were among the most popular, each receiving responses well into a year after they were started.

As of 2006, CCI has given participants the option of revealing their age in their profiles. When looking at the age of participants in the BlackPlanet and MiGente forums over a two-month span, there also seems to be a relationship between explicit use of race and age range of participants within discussion threads. Of those whose ages were visible, all were over the age of 30 in the "War" thread, while those in the "I'm Black and I Voted For Bush" thread had seven participants under 25. Likewise, "Blacks and the military" attracted participants ranging in age from 19 to 40, while the "9/11 and Bush" thread had fewer respondents and none who were younger than 35. In the MiGente threads "Race Confusion Among So-Called Latins"<sup>66</sup> and "If You Are Latino and Dont Speak Spanish Does This Make You Hispanic?"<sup>67</sup> the average age of the respondents was 22, with the youngest participants aged 17 and 16, respectively. However, in "your take on the war?"<sup>68</sup> much like on BlackPlanet, participants were, on average, eight years older, with the eldest contributor being age 45.

Years ago, it was typical for participants to claim their communities rhetorically by declaring their cultures or heritages before engaging with a particular question. As was described in the previous section, when members responded to labellatina1001's question, "What are you," they frequently qualified their "Latineness" as their rite of participation in the forum. As a rhetorical strategy, qualifying one's Latineness makes one an authority and implies that one is a credible source of information about community issues. In this way, respondents make clear that racial proximity to community is tied to one's right to influence decision

making. Today, however, this relationship seems to have gone underground. While race or ethnicity is still the benchmark for participation, very few members or users actually state who they are. In response to a question about whether speaking Spanish defines one's Latinoness, one respondent states, "The problem with Hispanics is that we don't network like [Jews], [Europeans] do,"<sup>69</sup> while another retorts, "No one should consider themselves [*sic*] Hispanic we are LATINO."<sup>70</sup>

Rather than provide evidence that either one is Hispanic or Latino, the use of the inclusive term *we* establishes that both participants are part of the dominant group and thus are capable of legitimately contributing to conversations about the community "problem." While this shift away from qualifying one's identity can be the result of ongoing interaction, the prevalence of this pattern may also suggest that the default assumption is that participants are indeed in dialogue with members of the dominant group, unless otherwise stated. Moreover, the presumption is that the site is more or less free from outsiders, and that being from the dominant CCI racial community group still determines one's right to weigh in, particularly when weighing in means being critical of that particular group.

So assumed is membership in the racial/ethnic dominant group that participants are shocked when CaseyCanada, the originator of the seventy-three-page thread (and counting) "How Do You Feel about 'Whites' on BP," reveals that she is white and participates in the site because she prefers "the company of blacks" over her own.<sup>71</sup> (Notice that this very popular thread names a race in the title.) Responses, which vary from, "You white?" to "What u doin on [here]?" to "Wow had no idea," show that even with a picture beside her name, most thought CaseyCanada was black because she had not stated otherwise.<sup>72</sup> Her use of "you" in the thread title shows that she, too, assumes that everyone else responding will be black. Ironically, the quotation marks around *whites* suggests that she is skeptical about race-based categorizing even when she proceeds to normalize her experiences, being "unwelcome" in several threads, as representative of black views on the whole. Though most simply acknowledge their surprise and continue to offer very candid responses, some abandon the question altogether and interrogate her connection to the community. Respondents try to understand her relational position as much as she feels compelled to explain and justify it. As is frequently the case with outsiders on these dedicated sites, signifiers of interpersonal relationships (i.e., "my best friend is," "I grew up near," or "my girl/boyfriend is") are offered as evidence of participants' alliances and intentions. For example, CaseyCanada posts:

I joined BP to interact with people not to pretend to be something [I'm] not. My reasons for [preferring] the company of black people (over my own) is mostly because: I have spent my whole life living amongst black people its what I've come to be comfortable with. I feel "out of touch" when Im around my own as crazy as it sounds.<sup>73</sup>

Embedded in CaseyCanada's statement above is the understanding that not wanting to be among one's own is simply not normal, and that by "living amongst black people" and by becoming "comfortable with" them, she is "out of touch" with her natural state of being—an outsider among whites. Seemingly unaware of the implications of her statement, CaseyCanada fails to understand why respondents accuse her of being racist, no different from "others," and just another example of how white power manifests itself time and time again. Since she didn't "say" anything racist and rather "prefers" being around black people, CaseyCanada deduces that this is yet another instance of how race is a "[delinquent] subject and one word out of context can cause havoc!"<sup>74</sup>

Members tend to scrutinize outsiders who present themselves as allies with much more rigor than they do explicitly racist ones. For example, when AryanNationPrincess created

racist posts (before her account was deleted), participants humorously quipped that her hatred must have been the result of a sexual relationship gone bad, or that "massa" was just "pissed" that she now has to purchase natural black features in order to get attention from white men. AryanNationPrincess's post received a mere twenty-one responses from seven participants in total, none of them really analyzing it with the care and attention paid to CaseyCanada. It must be noted that respondents quickly establish that a romantic interest in the opposite sex is the primary motivation for both CaseyCanada and AryanNationPrincess to join BlackPlanet. This pattern appears on all three sites, whether respondents are critically engaging the poster or humorously dismissing him or her. The particular community's sexualized history frequently undergirds its discursive interactions with outsiders.

But simply belonging to any one of CCI's dominant racial or ethnic groups does not guarantee that participants' contributions to these sites are welcome either. Knowledge of community history (or the willingness to learn) is just as critical as knowledge of a participant's own genetic makeup. In fact, familiarity with the community's origins, how the "race" really came to be, and how it has developed are typically offered as historical "facts" that vouch for both the "authenticity" and the authority of the poster. When LiLing2K (age unknown) details her schoolyard experiences with Japanese racism in Seattle, Washington, and connects this with centuries of Japanese–Chinese conflict, respondents congratulate her for being a "good girl" and for keeping her eyes on "who she is," in spite of her American influences. It is assumed here that LiLing2K's ability to interpret these experiences stems from cultural pride, and by extension a healthy sense of racial identity. In this way, LiLing2K becomes the model citizen in the discussion thread because she is born Chinese and is also conscious of the "undeniable facts of our history" that distinguish her from others grouped under "Asian." This consciousness is then associated with racially, and often gender-, appropriate behaviors. While youth demographics are not specifically at issue here, I believe we can extrapolate that, in this informal learning context, youth will indeed learn which attitudes they must subscribe to in order to become full-fledged members of their on- and offline communities.

As is evidenced above, there is an underlying assumption in the rhetoric that there are essential properties to one's racial or ethnic identity. Although participants never seem to agree on what that essence is—food, music, geography, blood, slavery, white domination, disenfranchisement, and skin color are some of the frequently occurring themes—their responses imply that this essence of race and ethnicity exists nonetheless. Examples of the ways in which participants on all three sites engage with the notion of "mixed blood" will demonstrate this ideological belief. Responses can run the gamut from "since I am *only* half I don't know if I can say"<sup>75</sup> (emphasis added), "am Haifa and proud. The best of both bloods in me,"<sup>76</sup> or "I [don't] care what anybody says [I'm] black cuz I got half [black] blood."<sup>77</sup> These few statements show how simple words like "only half," "both bloods," and "half black blood" contribute to a prevailing ideology that being born into a particular race largely determines who you are. But when faced with more overt essentialist notions, participants typically reject them, noting instead that there is so "much diversity of our race [defining] us is impossible."<sup>78</sup> As the following illustrates, when AsianAvenue's LeeK asks why Asians try to act like "the inferior race" by speaking "ebonics"—is it the popularity of hip-hop culture or is it reflective of deeper reasons such as identity or cultural displacement—his extremist position is admonished by the group, he is labeled a racist, and worse yet, he is viewed as being no different from whites. Responses increasingly address the inappropriateness of his comment, the way it does not account for diversity, how it threatens peace within and across

communities, and how, ironically, it reveals his self-hate, insecurity, and overall ignorance.<sup>79</sup> LeeK's desire to reduce all blacks to inferior "ebonics" speakers or to propose that Asians who speak it are "less" Asian, is vehemently opposed. In spite of this, most participants on other threads tend to agree that speaking another language changes them, and that to be real Asians means that they must speak their real languages.

The view that language is tied to *being* and identity is echoed on MiGente. When one poster asks why Latinos prefer Ebonics over Spanglish, a conversation that takes place in English on the English-speaking Latino site, many agree that it is because "[Latinos] are losing their way, have no pride, don't remember where [they] come from."<sup>80</sup> The premise of LeeK's post, that a community ought to speak its natural language, is understood, perhaps applauded. Whereas overt essentialism in LeeK's post is the focus of critical attention, a similar, albeit less obvious form, goes relatively unnoticed in the MiGente thread. Furthermore, those overt claims left LeeK open to charges of being ignorant and lacking in real self-worth, "Why else wouldn't [*sic*] you feel so threatened by blacks being on this site."<sup>81</sup> On MiGente, participants conclude that not to speak Spanish means that *those* Latinos are trying to be something they are not. The connection between speaking and *being* is a fairly recurring theme in the Heritage and Identity forum. Although several respondents on MiGente assert that Spanish is not the "natural language" of any Latino, such views are rarely the subject of intense dialogues. The more popular view supports the idea that Spanish is indeed a distinguishing feature of one's Latinoness.

Because consensus or group cohesion plays a large role in community life, it is fairly common for members to silence, modify, or limit the fullness of dissenting voices in favor of the dominant opinion within the thread. Even though some respondents in LeeK's thread remarked, "I hear what you're saying but you're going about it the wrong way," or "No comment," clearly indicating that they had alternative, perhaps even supportive, views, such sentiments were never elaborated upon.<sup>82</sup> Given that LeeK's question was not only met with unfavorable replies but was also used to determine that his was a self-esteem desperately in need of repair, it is no wonder that no one publicly sided with him. If we draw from these emotional issues and their consequences for young participants, we can see how easily dominant beliefs are passed on through the discourse, informing them that simply being born Asian, black, or Latino is not enough. Furthermore, there are opinions, views, and ways of acting online that are significant components of an authentic Asian, black, or Latino identity. Indeed, young participants on all three sites will learn which views will be applauded and which ones will be admonished. They will also learn that there are inherent discursive rules for *acting* or *being* online, and that these rules determine whether one has a healthy sense of racial pride, as well as whether one is a credible source of knowledge in the community.

As this discussion shows, discourse about race and ethnicity on social networking sites is rather complex. On the one hand, participants tend to object to the notion that they can be reduced to shared or essentialist racial or ethnic characteristics, frequently citing the diversity of personalities, appearances, and interests among their interpersonal networks as evidentiary. The most vehement opposition, though, comes about when they are faced with what is perceived as racist ideologies, particularly those that posters feel exemplify the continuation of white supremacist attitudes. On the other hand, participants also play active roles in reinforcing some of these prevailing notions, often inadvertently, by implying that there are definitive ways of being Asian, black, or Latino. Given that these forums are the centerpiece of public life for a cross-section of participants, particularly young people, there

are profound implications when considering that what is said about race, and how it is said, determines how the community interprets the value of each participant's contribution.

### Part III: The Future of Dedicated Sites

As I have argued throughout this chapter, dialogues about race and ethnicity are purposeful discursive events taking place on dedicated sites. It must be reiterated that these conversations are not inevitable consequences of holding membership in such sites; rather, participants willingly contribute to race-based discussion topics out of the myriad of others available to them. The Heritage and Identity forums have consistently been loci of public life, and with the addition of the age feature, it appears that these forums attract a fair share of the sites' young members. As loci of public life for several years, these online forums are where ideologies are likely to be developed, promoted, contested, and institutionalized. Furthermore, for any participant who has a stake in the community, weighing in about race becomes a fundamental component of large-scale community engagement. That these conversations are likely to bring with them taken-for-granted beliefs is certainly nothing new. Demonstrating what critical language theorists mean when they say that discourse reflects the sociocultural material affecting producers of that discourse, some ideologies are so deeply embedded in the common sense of their cultures that participants inevitably reify values that, when otherwise made conscious of them, they would oppose.

But unlike other forms of media, participants in these online networks—many of whom are youth—are active producers of their content and exert a real sense of ownership over these spaces. It is much easier under these conditions to naturalize various ideological strains, because it appears as though what is circulated as discursive truths originate from the communities that utter (type) them. Because consensus in such peer-communities is inherently bound to community status and degree of racial pride, participants are also less likely to critique these truths, further allowing them to be upheld as the standard. As a result, becoming critical of and interrogating such below-the-radar ideologies is made more difficult (though not impossible), especially when adherence to them is the benchmark of identity, participation, and public life. This situation is further complicated because young people are more susceptible to the influence of their peers, whether positive or negative, and are participating in these communities at a time when their needs for acceptance, approval, and belonging are highest.

Given that these beliefs are produced and consumed—learned and taught—by those that have been troped by them underscores the need for theorizing about what young people consume as participants in these informal learning spaces, and for developing effective tools for helping them to engage with them more critically. Aside from learning the rules about initiating, structuring, and participating in large-scale discussions with others from around the world, members are constantly learning and teaching each other about the overall effect that the individualized act of voicing opinion has on collective thinking and action. The latter element could well be one of the most important discursive acts taking place on these sites. For those who may not yet be granted full access to the public sphere offline (if ever), participants have the opportunity to speak and be heard on what they see as more equal ground. By virtue of their contributions to public life, members learn the importance of consensus, as both a measure of collective reasoning and as a mechanism for silencing or ignoring those opinions that are out of favor with the majority. Informal citizenship schools with no prescribed curriculum so to speak, participants effectively learn and teach each

other about which aspects of race and ethnicity are fundamental for public engagement. In learning how to speak about, listen to, or repress certain ideas about race and ethnicity, participants also forge a much deeper understanding of the connection between online politicking and offline social structures. Interaction on these sites becomes a fundamental aspect of relationship-building under conditions like mass participation, which inevitably teaches them about the complex ways in which racial identifications continue to serve as common ground, especially in an increasingly globalized, multicultural world. With so many members, millions dialoguing in larger conversations, participants not only learn to form community but they learn the different styles of communication within their respective diasporas.

For participants in these learning environments, online literacy skills will be useful tools in providing them with the ability to read and interpret texts of which they are both consumers *and* producers. Though much has been said about critical literacy skills elsewhere<sup>83</sup> and the ways in which such tools have been used historically to empower communities of color, we must also listen to the cautionary words of scholars like Adam Banks who argue that for a society in which racist ideologies run so deep, literacy skills alone cannot guarantee the kind of material, functional, experiential, and critical access that is needed for young users of color to see themselves as “users, producers, and even transformers” of the varying technologies informing their day-to-day lives.<sup>84</sup>

As ripe with potential as these online forums are—imagine the possibility of Malcolm X ushering a call to 16 million African Americans in 1960—there has yet to be any real hypothesizing or organizing around key issues that each community deems important to its offline life. By real hypothesizing or organizing, I mean that group discussions about issues like police profiling, discrimination in restaurants, improper translation of ballots, flying while Muslim, or driving while black do not include ways of translating this level of community consciousness into the type of collective action or decision making that is part and parcel of any public sphere. What is rarely heard or seen in seven years’ worth of observations is the sense that “something can be done” to counter the varying forms of hegemonic control participants encounter offline. Although examples can be called upon where communities of color have deliberately used online networking to impact offline conditions (part II of this chapter provided just a few of them), public life for the more than 16 million participants on CCI’s sites has yet to produce the kind of action consistent with the level of discourse about racism and social justice taking place. My most recent work on BlackPlanet has shown that, while youth are clearly engaged in conversations about issues of common concern to the larger black community, these discussions never moved beyond a discursive level of civic engagement. In fact, when I analyzed postings about Hurricane Katrina and genocide in Darfur, participants who suggested that the group should “do something” were either summarily dismissed, called “irrational,” or placated with polite acknowledgments.<sup>85</sup>

Developing new ways to combat the pernicious effects of the “why bother” rhetoric I witnessed in these discussions is of chief importance because young participants must see that there is a fundamental relationship between collective voice and social change. Likewise, helping young people to see that such sites are public forums that are useful vehicles for civic engagement is necessary, especially for black and Latino communities, who continue to internalize the otherwise immobilizing rhetoric of the digital divide. Teaching them about the potential of such connective capabilities will have real consequences on how young people of color think about the possibilities of new media, and themselves, in bringing about material change.

Despite the range of challenges discussed above, for young people, participating in dedicated social networking sites is especially important because they can be useful vehicles for strengthening their cultural identities, for teaching them how to navigate both public and private dimensions of their racial lives, and for providing them access to a more globalized yet unfixed conversation about their community histories. Scores of contemporary research studies show how important cultivating intragroup cultural networks is to minority youth.<sup>86</sup> Much like the world offline, participating in online cultural communities will help them to develop a healthy sense of racial identity, what psychologists argue is necessary to resist the pernicious effects of racism. In likening a healthy cultural identity to a healthy psyche, Marcia suggests that without it, an individual is unable to adapt easily in more diverse environments.<sup>87</sup> These findings also underscore why minority youth must have access to dedicated online spaces, not just mainstream or "race neutral" ones. Seeking out and logging in to online communicative spaces is a central component of the lives of all young people today; however, participating in those that are more likely to value the raced experiences of minority youth not only teaches them that who they are offline bears as much relevance to who they are online, but it also teaches them that talking about this aspect of social life can help them redress the impact of racism.

## Notes

1. Delpi, Why Are So Many Whites Here? *Asian Avenue*, April 9, 2000. Retrieved May 28, 2000. <http://www.asianavenue.com/Members/Forums/FORUM=13501>.
2. The names of CCI participants quoted in this chapter have been changed to protect their identities. Although the rules for conducting online research are not firm, I have followed some of the guidelines prescribed by Norman K. Denzin, *Cybertalk and the Method of Instances*, in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 107–126. Throughout this study, I have never interacted with any of the participants cited nor have I asked for permission to quote directly. Such practices are fairly common, given that all of the information included in this chapter is "public" and available to anyone who registers on the particular CCI site. Nonetheless, I have changed the participants' names and have not provided the URLs to their specific posts. Instead of URLs to the posting, I have included the URL for the thread, the site name, and date the post was created.
3. Because members are not restricted from opening multiple accounts, it is likely that the number of subscribers per site is not representative of the actual number of individual members. For example, in 2004, BlackPlanet boasted a whopping 18 million subscribers; in 2006 the number hovered around 14 million. Although users are worldwide, the majority are based in the United States. In 2004, Forrester Research estimated that Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos accounted for over 18 million Web users combined, and that in 2000, 3.8 million African American households were online. Nonetheless, the combined membership of these sites is still likely to be well in the millions.
4. Gee defines *Discourses* (with a capital D) as our ways of being in the world. Every Discourse has a "tacit theory" as to what determines a normal person within discourse, and this defines what is the right way for each person to speak, listen, act, value, and think. See James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999). According to Josephine Peyton Young, Discourse is like a "club with [implicit rules] about how [members] are [to] behave." See Boy Talk: Critical Literacy and Masculinities, *Reading Research Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2000): 312. For example, BlackPlanet member BigWhiteBlob (name used with permission) posted a rather interesting response to a forum question that asked whether it is possible to "know" with certainty that someone is Black in cyberspace. He stated that

“it isn’t really the sprinkling of faces that are like your own, that is nice, but it is really about the content, I can tell by the expressions used on people’s pages or the way they describe themselves that I am in my real community.” Interestingly, BigWhiteBlob refers to the ways in which members speak (quite frankly type) as evidence of their insider/outsider positionalities. That seeing a picture of someone who looks like you is not enough suggests that some transference of real-world communicative modalities is necessary to gain full access. Discourses (and language choices) function as boundary markers, signs of proximity to territory, mapping who is inside or outside, what is authentic, and who belongs, as well as a host of historical, political, and epistemological understandings of realities, knowledge(s), texts, and selves.

5. According to Norman Fairclough, Critical Language Studies (CLS) analyzes “social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and which sets out to show up their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as hidden effects they may have upon that system.” See *Language and power* (London: Longman, 1989), 5. With these postulations on the relationship of language and power, along with the contributions of Foucault, CLS becomes an “alternative orientation to language studies which implies a different demarcation of language study into approaches or branches, different relationships between them, and different orientations within each of them” (Ibid., 13).

6. Ibid., 5.

7. See Community Connect, Inc., “About us.” Retrieved May 4, 2002. <http://www.communityconnect.com/about.html>.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. John Gangemi, A MySpace That Speaks Your Language, *BusinessWeek.com*, September 2006, [http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/sep2006/sb20060920\\_307149.htm?chan=search](http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/sep2006/sb20060920_307149.htm?chan=search). Retrieved October 11, 2006.

11. Ibid.

12. In spite of the decline in daily participation on the CCI sites, the company has managed to maintain its foothold as the leading special-interest Web publisher for American ethnic groups, and remains in the top fifty of Web content publishers for the last eight years. Web trafficking sites like Alexa and comScore are useful resources for comparing the daily participation of these sites.

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14. Ibid., 16.

15. Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 26.

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18. In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens notes that “[a] person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self.” See *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 54.

19. Habermas argues, through a Kantian analysis, that civil society allows man "to engage in a debate over the general rules of governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange in social labor." See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 27. For Kant, civil society in Europe relied on the private man's public use of his reason. See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What Is Enlightenment*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1990). For a discussion on alternative public spheres, read Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109–142.
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22. Stuart Hall, Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect," in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woolcott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 318–323.
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57. In order to gain access to all of the features that each of these sites offer, participants must register and disclose their sex, age, level of education, and racial or ethnic characteristics. Interestingly, the identity categories and requirements differ on each site. Identity on AsianAvenue is denoted by one's ethnicity, with members choosing from among twenty-one ethnic groups. From 2000 to 2005, BlackPlanet members only had five choices available to account for their identities: Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, and White. By 2006, with its site redesign, members can choose "other" or type in a specific ethnicity. MiGente registrants can choose from among ethnic origin and race. There are twenty-five ethnic categories like Dominican, Cuban, and so forth and the same five racial categories available on BlackPlanet. Commenting on the click-box identity, Lisa Nakamura argues that the process of choosing identity in this way forces users into dominant notions of race. Arguably, the various changes to these categories in the site redesign may be indicative of an increased social awareness of the inadequateness of these categories. Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

58. CCI has twice revamped its sites and, as a result of this, older threads and discussions that may have been brimming with meaning were deleted. The discussion forums were disabled during the time of the redesign, and in the case of AsianAvenue, discontinued altogether.

59. It appears as though AsianAvenue has undergone the most drastic modifications in comparison to the other two CCI sites. I suspect that these changes are in an effort to keep up with current social networking trends used on sites like MySpace. As such, there is no general public forum for the entire AsianAvenue community.

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