

Lisa Nakamura, **Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet**, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2008, 248 pp., \$17.55 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Marcia Alesan Dawkins

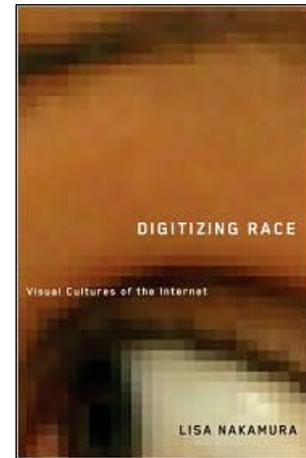
California State University, Fullerton

In a *post-racial*, *post-feminist*, and "*post-Internet*" age, questions of race, gender, and access can often be treated with ambivalence, if they are treated at all (p. 2). This is because the United States has reached a moment in which basic rights for all have been won. Constituents who support this *post-* perspective remind society that because everyone can be successful and independent, and, more importantly, can identify and express themselves online successfully and independently, our society is now said to have transcended our culture wars. But culture wars are always lurking.

Lisa Nakamura's *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, explores the culture wars of Web 2.0 as they are now emerging—from AIM icons, to pregnancy and ethnic quiz sites, to iPod ads and Trek Kelley's "iPod Ghraib" remixes, to Jennifer Lopez's music videos, to *Six Feet Under*, the *Matrix Trilogy*, *Gattaca*, and *Minority Report*. Nakamura offers an insightful analysis of digital visual culture and its diversity articulated through her theory of "digital racial formation" that aims to "parse the way that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with" racial formation as an "ongoing process" (p. 14). As a whole, *Digitizing Race* can be taken as an attempt to explain how the Internet acts as a space for re-embodiment, rather than as a space for disembodiment and colorblindness.

Her method makes use of Foucauldian archaeology, systematically describing digital images as visual "discourse-object(s)" (Foucault, 1972, p. 140). In each case study, Nakamura burrows into an image to exhume the subjective positions and stories of those it represents. Her task becomes an excavation. I enjoyed reading it this way because each case study represented an archaeological dig into the Internet as a space that supports and disrupts traditional narratives of racial formation.

She begins examining this space in the Introduction, entitled "Digital Racial Formations and Networked Images of the Body." Here she borrows Lisa Parks's term "visual capital" and establishes it as the framework for her investigation.<sup>1</sup> The relevance of this term is enhanced by her updated theoretical approach. After establishing this foundation, she poses her primary research question: "If we are starting to understand what the *subject* of interactivity might look like . . . , what or who is its *object*?" (p. 15).



<sup>1</sup> Visual capital is "a system of social differentiation based upon users/viewers' relative access to technologies of global media" (Parks, 2002, p. 284).

The first "object" uncovered is the body of Jennifer Lopez. Introduced to audiences in her first video *If You Had My Love*, Nakamura writes that "we see [Lopez] as he [the viewer] sees her, through interface use . . . the body is that of the Latina, the woman of color, and the mind is that of a white man" (p. 19). This split suggests that even in the digital world, race and gender are made most meaningful when "figured against . . . powerful discourse(s) of whiteness" and maleness (Shugart, 2007, p. 188). As a result, Lopez takes on a mobile racial identity based on the viewer's identity, psychology, and preference. Such assignments are the strength and weakness of new media when it comes to issues of race. New media's new interactivity links personality, taste, and identity to everyday technology and culture through information gathering, representation, and institutional networks. Thus, Nakamura explains, the power of content messages and user interactivity must be weighed equally.

Moving from the mainstream ethnic cross-over to the marginal ethnic niche, Nakamura explores AOL Instant Messenger buddy icons in her first chapter, "'Ramadan Is Almost Here!' The Visual Culture of AIM Buddies, Race, Gender and Nation on the Internet." Nakamura's main point is that buddy icons deserve critical attention because they "are locations of overt and controversial identity formation by large numbers of IM users from minority groups who may not engage in any other graphical production practices online" (p. 69). After providing a brief historical account of the medium, she describes the icons found on [www.buddyicon.info](http://www.buddyicon.info), focusing on how they address "the eye" in order to both equate socializing with entertainment and make a variety of identifications. Comparing amateur icons created by and for adolescent Western girls who are Muslim and Christian shows that on one hand, they can be a way for females to construct and present their digital identities in counter-hegemonic terms. On the other hand, these presentations of the young female form are "fetishes and fetishized" because they exhibit "a virtual inventory of its parts" within a box that is subjugated to the prior existence of textual conversation (pp. 66-67; 69).

In keeping with the theme of excavating lesser-known digital sites with multiple meanings, Nakamura enters AllLookSame.com in Chapter Two, "AllLookSame? Mediating Visual Cultures of Race on the Web." Presented as a modern-day Turing test, the site asks users to distinguish among "Asians" and figure out whether they are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Unmentioned are the ways in which the site's construction of "Asianness" excludes Southeast and Multiracial Asians. Nevertheless, Nakamura finds that the site gives Asian American "users" a place to "commiserate with each other about their low scores and to . . . confirm that seeing is not believing" (p. 81). As a result, Nakamura argues that [AllLookSame.com](http://AllLookSame.com) reifies historical controversies about phenotypical identification, detection, and passing that are anything but *post-racial* (p. 82).<sup>2</sup> However, she argues that the site develops a "new *post*-Internet paradigm of knowledge and cognition" that calls for "pattern recognition," "visual literacy," and an understanding of production processes by and for an increasingly diverse set of global users (p. 94).

At this point, Nakamura enlarges her focus to explore how mainstream artifacts of digital racial formation "encode race as property" (p. 97). In Chapter Three, "The Social Optics of Race and Networked Interfaces in *The Matrix Trilogy* and *Minority Report*," she finds that black users are represented as cool,

---

<sup>2</sup> One important note here is that the site's author does not provide any way by which to confirm the supposed accuracy of reported scores.

natural, analog-using "support staff" and "witnesses" to others' direct technological use, perhaps the boldest claim made in this section is that "the paradox of whiteness is the very paradox of new media" (p. 98). White users are depicted using interfaces with gestures alone. For instance, in *The Matrix: Reloaded*, whites are one with machines and therefore easily replicable, identical, and ultimately soulless simulations. In *Minority Report*, the only way for the white protagonist to change is to replace his eyes with those of an Asian businessman. While most critics see this new set of eyes as an expression of the dangers of surveillance and detection, Nakamura discusses it in terms of racial formation. Though Asia is the backdrop for *Minority Report's* future, its white protagonist is unable to "engage with the interface as a superuser with Asian eyes" (p. 130). As a racial hybrid, he has lost the mark of whiteness and its digital privileges. Of equal importance is that these images are mirrored in popular interface culture (e.g., Apple's iPod).

In her fourth case study, "Avatars and the Visual Culture of Reproduction on the Web," Nakamura returns to the everyday production of digital images in the form of pregnancy bulletin board avatars on [Babydream.com](http://Babydream.com). She contrasts these images of "the real female body" with the commercial and template images of women in video games (p. 136). In so doing, she finds "a newly forming taste culture" influenced by a medicalized discourse and "gaze" that creates bonding among mothers-to-be and between mothers-to-be and their fetuses (p. 137). Within this "taste culture," invisible bodies appear and individual narratives and experiences are more persuasive than jargon and statistics. She finds that some mothers insert icons into their signatures to represent fetuses, miscarriages, and stillborn children. This is significant because "women graphically embody themselves as dual subjects of interactivity . . . thus publicizing bodies and lives previously unrepresented by the women living them" (170).

Nakamura adds variables of access and interactivity in her final chapter, "Measuring Race on the Internet: Users, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the United States." She critiques Internet surveys that ignore digital production of women and racial and ethnic minorities (p. 172). She begins by explaining that studies such as the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports produce skewed results because they define Asian Americans as English speaking, though no mention is made of how this could also apply to Hispanic communities. She closes by stressing that richer empirical data can more accurately answer the questions of how and to what degree users reshape Internet discourse. The Epilogue, "Racio-Visual Logic of the Internet," brings together the objects and sites explored throughout the text. She concludes that *post*-racial logic is being challenged by people of color and women who represent themselves digitally. If we are to understand what such images mean in the Internet world, then we must change our priorities, perspectives, and politics.

Nakamura's book fills a gap in the literature and is becoming increasingly important and useful for those who are willing to see beyond the utopian rhetoric of Web 2.0. Its strengths are its focus on quotidian images and users to show race is most meaningful when considered along with gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and Internet access and interactivity. However, it too often relies on the assumption that visibility guarantees legitimacy. This was a surprise, considering the author's previous work on Internet tourism and cross-racial passing and discussions in this book about "the eye." This assumption could have been dealt with by conducting interviews with image users that also connect to discussions of Internet infrastructure and agency. Other things also seemed to be missing from the book. For instance,

discussions of YouTube, social networking and dating sites would have been relevant and interesting. Considering visual file-sharing sites like Flickr could also have strengthened the discussion of mother-child and pregnancy images in Chapter Four, as the site is often used to share these kinds of pictures. A book that is released after the explosion of such sites should discuss them, even if only in its Epilogue to indicate areas for future research. Also missing is a discussion of how the case studies connect to one another. For example, one way in which the argument could have been strengthened is by comparing the IM icons from Chapter One with the pregnant avatars from Chapter Four. Without such connections across cases, it can be argued that the non-mainstream case studies cannot stand alone as valid without being compared to mainstream images. I will admit that this concern overlooks what I take to be the book's main strength: giving equal status and consideration to user-generated and popular media as serious reflections of one another and society. For this reason, *Digitizing Race* is an important intervention into the study of visual cultures, digital racial formation, and critical Internet studies.

### References

- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. (A. M. S. Smith, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
- Nakamura, L. (2008). *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Parks, L. (2002). "Satellite and cyber visualities: Analyzing 'digital earth.'" In Nicholas Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The visual culture reader* (pp. 279-292). New York: Routledge.
- Shugart, H. A. (2007). Crossing over: Hybridity and hegemony in popular media. *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 4(2): 115-141.