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Undercurrents: a dialogue by Maria Fernandez, Irina Aristarkhova and Coco Fusco (c) 2002

Launched earlier this year, *Undercurrents* is an online discussion list about how cyberfeminism, new technologies, postcoloniality and globalization are interrelated. Moderated by Irina Aristarkhova, Maria Fernandez, Coco Fusco and Faith Wilding, *Undercurrents* seeks to challenge the utopian ideology of cyberculture and explore the many practical and philosophical reasons to question libertarian characterizations of electronic culture and virtual reality. In their opening statement to the list, the moderators said, "As much as we support the democratic goals of many who have contributed to alternative discourses within net.culture, we do not agree that the ideal of a digital commons, feminist or otherwise, necessarily transcends the problematic logic of race and racism. We are deeply skeptical of such assumptions because we understand that race and racism involve much more than skin, bodies, overt segregation or physical violence. We argue instead that race is manifest in both the essentializing ventures of law and science and in the arenas of performativity that denaturalize and de-essentialize embodiment, including cyberspace."

In this dialogue, three of the *Undercurrents* moderators, Maria Fernandez, Irina Aristarkhova and Coco Fusco discuss their reasons for initiating this project as well as some of the political objectives and implications of the list.

FROM MARIA FERNANDEZ

What's the link between race/ethnicity, new media and feminism? What are the main issues we wanted to address?

For the last ten years, I have argued that the lack of engagement with postcolonial studies constitutes a major gap in theories of new media. This gap is even greater in cyberfeminism, a formation that until recently denied having links to feminism.

Often I am asked what relevance postcolonial studies have to cyberfeminism. That this question should be posed in an era of permanent warfare, seemingly unending migrations, racist national security and immigration policies, brutal nationalisms, global ecological and economic crisis, anti-globalization movements and renewed and continuous efforts in various parts of the world to exploit and control women's bodies and labor invariably surprises me. Are these phenomena conceived as independent from the complex of relations, transactions and interventions facilitated by electronic technologies? Are they regarded as irrelevant to women?

Some critics describe Postcolonial studies as a field championed by elite South Asian academics, living primarily in the US, who advance "victimization theories" with little consciousness of their own privilege. Others dismiss all of postcolonial studies as outdated, unsophisticated "identity politics." These are troubling characterizations. The history of Latin America, colonial, post-modern and post-colonial avant la lettre indicates the need for more informed understandings of the field. Regardless of where one chooses historically and geographically to situate colonialism, postcolonial studies is less a discreet area of study than an ongoing interdisciplinary interrogation of the dynamics and the legacies of colonization and empire, focusing especially on European occupations since 1492 and the more recent American imperialism.

In the current global political climate, examinations of dominant notions of race and the multifaceted aspects of racism are pressing. Instead of encouraging reflection on these issues, many cyberfeminists suppress it. In the rare cyberfeminist considerations of racism, there seems to be a confusion between racism as a social problem, and an individual's voluntary identification with a specific group. Those wishing to discuss racism are accused of essentialism and derided for their ignorance of recent theoretical and scientific developments. The centuries-old realization (by those at the receiving end) that race is a construction is touted as a newly discovered truth. Because "race does not exist" racism is cast as an imaginary problem in the mind of naive, retrogressive individuals. Simultaneously, the image of "the Third World Woman" as poorly educated, bound by repressive cultural traditions and by the body, living and thinking in a time anterior to their first world counterparts prevails. Whoever she is, this woman has no place in cyberfeminism.

Cyberfeminism was not always antithetical to postcolonial issues. In the early nineties, the Australian collective VNS Matrix, welcomed and facilitated discussions of cultural identities, globalization and female labor even if these themes were absent in their own work. After the reconfiguration of cyberfeminism in Europe and the US it has become increasingly difficult to address such issues in cyberfeminist fora. Thus I became interested in creating or helping to create a space where these discussions could occur. My intention was less to find easy solutions to the world's problems (another

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criticism hurled at those who insist on the importance of postcolonial studies) but to introduce debates occurring in other areas - including feminist activism and women studies - to cyberfeminism.

How is it possible to bring so many diverse women together?

Originally, I wanted to keep *Undercurrents* small and private. My intention was to get to know other women with serious interest in the intersections of digital media and colonial/postcolonial issues and establish possible areas of collaboration and intervention. As the list is larger and more diverse than I envisioned, my immediate goals must change. An electronic mailing list replicates dynamics and power claims of flesh encounters. Alliances are made on the basis of affinities, desires, aspirations as well as fears (i.e. losing specific privileges). I have never had illusions of bringing a great number of diverse women together. And I do not have them now. I am pleased, however, that our objective of opening up discussions related both to electronic media and the practices and legacies of colonialism is being achieved.

How do moderators see their role and what do they hope to open up with this list?

I see my role primarily as one who invites and encourages discussion. I do not want to ask or answer all the questions. I am hoping that with time, more women- especially women of color will want to participate and establish solidarities regardless of the risks.

FROM IRINA ARISTARKHOVA

What's the link between race/ethnicity, new media and feminism?

This link might not be apparent to many, or might not be on their priority list, but for me this is an absolutely crucial link to make and to explore, a matter of responsibility to the current moment. Especially today, when conservatives are winning all over Europe, when the neo-fascist movement is blooming, new media art and theory valorize apolitical cross-breeding of cultures in cyberspace and digital selves, when young women are stupid enough to think they are free to do what they want and therefore feminism is over, and when the 'war on terror' is an excuse to wipe out dissent, rights of ethnic and religious minorities and political opposition.

How is it possible to bring so many diverse women together? - Or, is it possible to bring so many diverse women together, and what does 'bring together' mean?

Cultural and social attitudes towards 'women coming together' are usually negative, and as a consequence, we observe lack of women skilled in dealing with each other on every day basis. When women want to come together, especially outside the lines of what society wants to contain under the banner of 'women's places and issues', it becomes a social problem. Especially in case of ethnic minority women. As a result, even today in most so-called 'developed countries', women still struggle to respect each other in their professional capacity. They find it difficult to deal with each other with a respectful distance at work and at home. Such distance should not necessarily be seen as a matter of discord and separation, but has a potential of leaving a space for another woman to express herself, when coupled with a welcoming smile. How women can come together while leaving a breathing space for each other - this is what interests me. Now let's allow this question to be infused by two other issues new media and racial / cultural differences. Women who know each other personally, who are colleagues or friends, face formation of net-communities in different ways than those who've never seen each other and belong to drastically diverse geographic locations. And it is not simply a question of miles and kilometers, plus e-mail communication. On the one hand, we have to consider already established stereotypes. There has been a politics of that small new media art / theory / activism community going on, which is not familiar and may be, not even relevant, to many women around the world. Nevertheless, those women have their own relations to new media, which is slowly becoming of crucial importance to those established centers of new media art and theory (the US, Australia, Western Europe and Japan).

My personal interest in the *Undercurrents* is exactly the question of how to bring together diverse women through the formation of net communities which are not to be united, stable, or permanent. I am more interested in how we can use the net, or misuse it, to at last start understanding the practice of difference. How do we create a space which can allow for our differences to manifest themselves without appropriation by a unified language, unified strategy? This is difficult especially among women, especially on-line, and especially when the question of racial / ethnic / cultural differences is central and not marginalized.

How do moderators see their role and what do they hope to open up with this list?

As I was writing in the list posts, I see my role as opening up doors for women without expecting anything in return. Hospitality involves both surprise and readiness to enact it once and again. It puts pressure on both the hostess and the guest, making their positions fluid and dynamic. One has to face the point of decision constantly, hesitating on how and when to react and what to do at every point. I was invited to be a moderator by one of the moderators, etc. It is not news that the internet is extremely racist just like other social spaces and yet different from them too. As soon as one does not speak English well enough, or does not live near geographical power knots of 'new media crowd', or does not want to dissolve into so-called "globalized network" of neo-colonial net, one lives through one's skin, one's place, one's difference as an everyday disadvantage.

In short, for myself as a moderator I saw a terrible lack of participation and welcoming of women of

color into discussions on new media and technology both within and outside geographies of technological power. Some even think it's over, that is, "race was modernity, and now it does not matter anymore, since we kind of live in postmodernity", that is, in cyberspace or VR. Such an intellectual blockage, such a theoretical and political blindness is problematic especially in this social and political moment.

Undercurrents is an attempt, and not a solution to this situation. It is difficult and no one expected it to be easy on us. But we are learning and I am happy it has been really happening. I wish more women would be able to play an active part in it, that we will be able to embrace more of those who might really need it, but we do not yet know about them and they - about us. So I would invite them to write to us and let's take it from there.

FROM COCO FUSCO

What's the link between race/ethnicity, new media and feminism?

My co-moderators have already pointed out the relevance of the spread of xenophobia and fascism, the rapid growth of refugee populations and the increasing recognition of the social, economic and political impact of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity in Europe and other parts of the world, so I won't go into those important factors again here. I would only add that it is important to me to see these terms as linked because I believe there has been a strong tendency among both neoliberals and alternative net.cultural theorists to see them as having nothing to do with each other - that foreclosure of debate screams out for interrogation!

There are long histories of dialogues and non-dialogues about the relationship among these terms and that is what we are trying to explore on the *Undercurrents* list. Feminism as it is understood in the US at least, has had a turbulent relationship with questions of race and ethnicity, as has been pointed out by many black women theorists such as Angela Davis and bell hooks. On the one hand, many white feminists have supported anti-racist struggles; on the other hand many white feminists have tended to universalize their experiences and believe they speak for all women, reject any analysis of their relative privilege viz a viz ethnic minority women and men, and reproduce the "benevolent colonialist" logic of the "good missionary." Discourses on and around technology are particularly susceptible to these power dynamics since technological progress has historically been associated with colonization, with Europe and America and especially with the white populations in them. As cybercultures emerged in the 90s, I noted that there was a tendency even among cyberfeminists to posit technocentric concerns as being beyond the body, beyond race, beyond the history of female disempowerment and exploitation that is as old as capitalism. Similarly, there were many cyberenthusiasts coming from the elites in "peripheral" and "developing" countries who embraced new technologies as their quick route to modernity, without addressing the vast gap between their situation and that the majority populations in their societies. Suddenly thanks to computers, the internet and biotech we were all supposed to believe that there was little need for a feminist politics beyond becoming one with one's machines. That view of the relationship between feminism and new technologies is deeply troubling to me. Feminists from ethnic minority groups and from developing countries often have very different priorities and agendas, but given the racialized imbalance of power in the media, academia and the arts, most feminists of color at some point are compelled to address their relationship to the dominant (white) feminist discourses of the day, and to raise the kinds of questions we are trying to raise.

What are the main issues we wanted to address?

So far the discussions on the list have been about many different but interrelated matters, such as the misuse of the term essentialism as a tactic for denying the validity of experience, the meaning and influence of technoformalism; the relationship among whiteness, the celebration of disembodiment, and cybertheory; the problematic association of multiculturalism with ethnic fundamentalism; the viability of tactical media, the role of testimony in the understanding and interpretation of state violence around the world, the contributions of afrofuturist thinkers to debates about new technologies, and more. To me these are all valid and relevant subjects and I am glad that so many people are contributing thoughtful comments. I did have a strong desire to unsettle the Eurocentrism of many of the alt.net lists I had subscribed to, and to explore how women who are involved with art and social change can use new technologies to further a feminist politics.

How is it possible to bring so many diverse women together? - Or, is it possible to bring so many diverse women together, and what does 'bring together' mean?

Well, possible or not, there are many women and men on the list from the North and South America, India, Singapore, China, Australia, and Europe. One of the most interesting and enlightening things about the discussion so far for me has been dealing with the perceptions and misperceptions of American multiculturalism that come from participants in other countries, particularly from Eastern Europe and Asia. Before starting *Undercurrents*, my discussions about these issues had been carried out primarily with other Americans, Latin Americans and black artists and theorists in Britain and to a lesser extent Australia. I've been faced with completely different set of perceptions here, which is quite challenging.

It would be great to have more women from different countries, cultural scenes and backgrounds involved. It would be fantastic if more women on the list spoke up! But I have come to understand that list-serve culture has a lot of lurkers, that not everyone feels the urgent need to speak up all the time, and that not everyone wants to spend endless hours reading and writing email! Also, many

women are afraid to articulate a feminist position even if they are interested, More women are afraid of discussing race and racism and are even more fearful taking a critical stance toward feminism in the context of a feminist discussion! I just hope that reading about the issues we discuss, absorbing the ideas, speaking in private and exchanging private correspondence about the list, all of which continues to go on outside, around and beyond *Undercurrents*, will help to open up more possibilities for a wider range of feminisms within new media cultures.

Undercurrents is currently a closed list. The list's full archive can be accessed at The Thing <http://bbs.thing.net>