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PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

Where Am I and Who Are 'We'?: Self-representation and
the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity on the Web

by Linda Leung

Abstract

Where am I and who are 'we'?: Self-representation and the intersection
of gender and ethnicity on the Web by Linda Leung

This essay examines the ways in which ethnic minorities are engaging
with representations of ethnicity on the Web through the production and
consumption of forms of auto/biography. For the purposes of this study,
auto/biographical Web texts are defined as those in which the authors
represent themselves, their ethnicities and/or their ethnic communities.
In particular, it highlights the relationships of representational power
between those who seek to write about the lives of the ethnic
communities of which they are part, and the consumers of such forms of
texts, including those who are spoken for. How is this ethnic author/ethnic
reader relation inflected by gender? The dynamics examined in this
research are between a group of ethnic minority female Web consumers
and ethnic minority male Web producers.

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Introduction

This essay examines the ways in which ethnic minorities are engaging
with representations of ethnicity on the Web through the production and
consumption of forms of auto/biography. In particular, it highlights the
relationships of representational power between those who seek to write
about the lives of the ethnic communities of which they are part, and the
audiences of such forms of texts, and how such power is inflected by
gender.

For the purpose of this study, the consumers of such Web texts were a
group 15 research subjects, including myself, who contributed to the
collection of empirical data. The research subjects were students I taught
on a foundation course in information technology for women from ethnic
minorities. They presented a ready-made group of 14 research subjects
who, like myself, as women from ethnic minorities, had experienced
marginalisation because of their respective ethnicities. It provided a
common basis for comparison although the experiences, as expected,
were incredibly diverse.

The research subjects were asked to 'surf' the World Wide Web for texts
which most adequately expressed their ethnic subjectivity. Subsequently,
they were asked to provide responses on the available range of texts on
the World Wide Web which reflected their ethnicities; aspects which were
crucially absent or inappropriately present; and alternative
representations they would propose if they were to create their own Web

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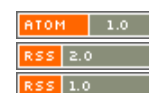
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ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Linda Leung

site.

The study required the research subjects to collect data from the Web, on their computers at home, in their own time and at their own pace, so it drew upon their experiences of interacting with the technology. Therefore, the students themselves were researchers which meant that an auto/biographical approach was needed in order for each research subject to report and comment upon her findings from the Web. The role of auto/biography in the research tasks is important, as it transfers as much as possible the responsibility of representation away from myself as the researcher to the research subjects.

The essay examines examples of the struggle between ethnic biography and auto/biography on the Web. It focuses on how ethnic minority readers contest the representations made by ethnic minority authors writing about their own communities. It also explores various configurations of the ethnic author/ethnic reader relation, ranging from unofficial contributions of Web-literate individual members of that community affiliated to powerful institutions, to those which are formal representations made by ethnic authors working within large organisations.

The Web texts discussed in this essay confirm the significant degree of ethnic minority activity on the Web found in Hoffman and Novak's (1998) research. However, they are also indicative of a particular ethnic class formation which, according to Terranova [1], probably does not include "the terminally unskilled and unemployed, single mothers on welfare, the old and poor, or the majority of residents in "underdeveloped" regions of the world". Therefore, it is clear that the kinds of representation on the Web being undertaken by ethnic minorities is an elite activity, that they are representative only of specific identity positions, of particular intersections of ethnicity with gender, class, nationality, age and other dimensions of subjectivity. The individualism of home pages are the extreme articulation of this. They highlight the quandary of representation: The ongoing struggle and yet the constant inadequacy of attempting to articulate ethnicity. This continuous process perhaps becomes more obvious in a medium like the Web which can accommodate a proliferation of images of ethnicity. But even with a technology such as the Web which offers vast opportunities in this area, the question of representation remains unresolved and ironically becomes more complex: Can representation ever suffice? Where do the boundaries between biography and auto/biography lie?

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Methodology

The research subjects were all ethnic minority women, each with different conceptualisations of their own ethnicities, which were variously defined as: British-born Nigerian; Nigerian born black African; British-Asian born in Pakistan; English-born/Jamaican origin; British-born Jamaican; British-born Afro Caribbean; Australian-born Chinese; African-born Black, British citizen; Asian-Bangladeshi; British-Caribbean; British Afro-Caribbean; African/Caribbean; Black African; Black British, and Chilean-Latin American. Our forays into the Web were aimed at locating and critically reflecting on articulations of aspects of our ethnic identities online.

Each research subject listed keywords that could be used when searching on the World Wide Web for sites which embodied their definition of themselves. They were given as an example keywords that related to the description of my own ethnicity as 'Australian-born Chinese':

- Australian
- Chinese
- Western Chinese
- Australian Chinese

Using the keywords they listed, the research subjects then searched the World Wide Web employing one search engine only. They were encouraged to visit the sites which seemed to represent their ethnicity as they defined it, noting the actual number of sites visited and the ones which were relevant. If there were no Web sites which were appropriate, they repeated the process using another search engine.

Initially, five potential respondents were contacted via e-mail. These individuals were selected at random from the researcher's personal address book. Each person was given detailed information and instructions on how to contribute to the study. After completing the questionnaire, each person was asked to contact five other people and ask them to take part in the study.

The research subjects were asked to record their findings, noting the following:

- Search engine used for each Web search
- Keyword/s used for each Web search
- Number of Web sites found with this keyword and search engine
- Number of Web sites visited with this keyword and search engine

- Details of the relevant Web sites using this keyword and search engine, including the URL and percentage of relevance
- Favourite or particularly good sites, and whether these articulated their ethnic identity sufficiently and, if not, why not?
- Sites with content which they felt was contentious or inappropriate, with an explanation of their reasoning.

These findings were submitted in writing by e-mail and in hard copy. The research subjects were also given the opportunity to further discuss their findings in an interview. Responses given by interview are specified below so that they can be distinguished from those given in writing, in recognition of the impact that methods of data collection can have on research subjects' responses.

Similarly, the process of collecting data from the Web via search engines requires some critical analysis. Searching on the Web is generally assumed to be an objective, technical and autonomous process (Ruhmann, 1997). Search engines, according to Baginski (1997), have a "sort of life in the net". But they are biased in a number of ways: Like any piece of software, they construct "a set of ways of sensing, knowing and doing in the world" (Fuller, 1999a); they structure the user's experience of the Web (Yahoo alone directs 30 million Web users a month; see Patelis, 1999), yet there is no system of organisation in the same way that libraries, for example, use the Dewey Decimal system:

> "... search engines and the arbitrary quality of wandering amongst hypertext makes coherent organization particularly daunting." (Franck, 1998)

Search engines are dependent upon the use of language to articulate what the user is seeking: In my search for heterogenous representations of Chineseness on the Web, my keywords simply did not adequately express this. A search engine will generally only find Web sites and pages containing those keywords, but this is not a guarantee of relevance. So even where there may be sites related to those keywords, if they are not present on the site, they would not be retrieved (Fuller, 1999b).

> "The search engine is absolutely unable to treat a word or any collection of symbols entered into it in a contextualised manner, there are ways of refining or narrowing down the search for sure, but the core of what it has to act upon is the string of characters that it has just been requested to find matches or correspondences to." (Fuller, 1999b).

That is, search engines are only able to assist the researcher in distinguishing between those sites which are relevant and those which are not through quantitative means. They cannot articulate the subtleties of language — allegory, irony, metaphor — and instead, operate on the premise of its universality and the standardisation of meaning (Fuller, 1999b). But it is not only the inability of search engines to critically and qualitatively discriminate Web content which skews the results of Web searches.

Searches are made more complicated by new texts being generated constantly on the Web and makes any kind of generalisation from the search results problematic. In 1997, there were an estimated 50 million Web pages with the number doubling each year (Fuller, 1999b). In comparison to this, Kelly and Wolf [2] estimated 150 million Web pages in 1997, increasing to one billion in 2000. Therefore, the accuracy of the results of searches are impossible to assess because search engines mask the ways they are programmed: They are what Fuller (1999b) calls 'black box' technologies.

Search engines ... cannot articulate the subtleties of language - allegory, irony, metaphor.

If, as Fuller and Lovink (1999) say, search engines reach a maximum of 15 percent of content on the Web, then the searches undertaken in this research did not thoroughly select from all the possible material on the Web. The sites and pages discussed in this study were only taken from "a thin slice of the Web" (Stalbaum and Jevbratt, 1999). Therefore, this study must acknowledge the selective biases of search engines and therefore, cannot claim that the research subjects had access to a representative sample of Web texts, nor that the Web texts found were, in any way, representative of ethnic minorities' participation in cyberspace. It is apparent that there are, inevitably, unknown variables and a certain degree of imprecision involved in Web research.

It is this lack of objective truth in Web research which makes it conducive to the study of competing subjectivities and hence auto/biography. This study's focus was on the representation of ethnic subjectivities, accurate or otherwise, on the Web; the claims being made for those representations and most importantly, the meanings made of them by the research subjects.

The temporary and cryptic nature of many Web texts further interrogates the notion of auto/biography and the validity of subjective truths. While

the research considers Web sites and pages to be official documentary sources [3] in that they are published texts, their official status is often called into question because the origins of Web sites and pages are not always apparent: The author may not declare his/her identity or contact details; the Web address does not necessarily indicate the whereabouts of the site's location or where the author resides.

Also, the transient quality of Web texts meant that some of the sites and pages found by the research subjects could not be located again. Either the texts had been moved to another site, or removed from the Web altogether. According to Kahle (1997), the average Web page is only online for 75 days, so there is considerable turnover: This is evident in the number of Web sites and pages found which are no longer accessible. In a few instances, the Web addresses had not been recorded properly by the research subjects. In other cases, the site had changed. Therefore, the status of the text itself was unpredictable to the extent that it was impossible to ascertain whether it existed at all, was out there in another location or in another form. This medium seems to fit the method, in that the Web facilitates this dynamic form of auto/biography in which ethnic minorities insist upon the right to write about their own lives as well as to 'duck and dive' from the production and consumption of such texts.

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Biography vs auto/biography

The representational opportunities the Web provides to ethnic minorities also enable debate amongst those communities. There is arguably as much contention when ethnicity is defined internally as it is externally [4]. While the notion of a virtual ethnic community falsely implies unanimity, perhaps the term "cyborg diaspora" (Gajjala, 1999) more appropriately articulates the differences embodied in the experience of ethnicity [5], especially those of gender.

A sample of texts chosen by the research subjects suggest the Web obscures traditionally distinct genres such as biography, auto/biography, cultural commentary and travel writing. As a result, points of contestation arise in relaton to authors writing about the countries which are an integral part of their lives and identities: Are their claims of authenticity being made on the basis of objectivity or subjectivity? At whom are these representations directed and what are the motivations underlying them? In the examples below, the representations of ethnicity made by male authors are actively resisted by female readers.

A Web site about Sudan chosen by Sasha, gives a very different image of the country to those of starvation and famine seen in Western media. It suggests Sudan to be an ideal tourist destination:

> "The capital, Khartoum, is connected by air to practically every part of the world and all the most important airlines operate there ... The visitor [to] Sudan will find a wide variety of interests ranging from wildlife to archeology, from the Red Sea to folklore and handicraft." [6]

Sasha took exception to this portrayal of Sudan, partly because it is intended to attract tourists to the country. That is, this representation of the Sudan exists for the 'white gaze' and is so far removed from Sasha's personal experience of Sudan that she argues that the information is simply not true.

> "I found there was lots of things about my country where I was born ... Sudan. They had things on the money they use, like the geography of the country, the best places to go to for tourists, the food they eat. All that kind of stuff that I didn�t think would be on the Internet... There was things on it that I didn't even know were in my country. They have places where you can go, like fun fair amusement places that they put on the Internet but when I was there I don't remember seeing those kind of things at all. I think they had just put that there for tourists so they'd see it and be impressed with it. When I was there things were never like that. On the Internet it says that there's plenty of food and everyone can eat ... but it's not true because when I was there — even now when I get letters from my friends and stuff things are really hard. Things are really hard so I wish they wouldn't put stuff like that on the Internet ... most of it is untrue. It's just to make the country look good enough for tourists to come and spend their money." (Sasha — interview)

The Web site seems to be an attempt by a person of Sudanese ethnicity to present a positive image of Sudan, at the expense of some omissions. Yet despite it being an example of a self-produced representation of ethnicity, the intended audience is white. That is, it is created in order to be consumed by the 'white gaze'. For Fanon [7], this demonstrates the internalisation of colonial ideology, whereby black people are determined to prove as much as possible that they share more similarities than

differences with their white colonisers. Thus, instead of the usual Western portrayal of Sudan as yet another anarchic and base African society [8], the Web site represents it as a destination that would appeal to the tastes of white tourists.

The Web site's claim to knowledge of widely unknown aspects of Sudan assumes the foreignness of the country to the reader. This sets up the mutual exclusivity of the native expert and the ignorant tourist like the East/West dichotomy of Orientalism [9]. This is often prevalent in sites pertaining to travel, which represent ethnicity in terms of exoticism. But instead of the West speaking on behalf of the East, representation is reclaimed by ethnic minorities in an act of self-determination. In the case of this Web site's portrayal of Sudan, the representation is not being made on behalf of its government or an organisation. Rather, the ~ symbol in its Web address indicates that it is a personal home page (Rubio, 1996) and therefore, the work of an individual, Tarig Monawar, who also claims copyright of the content on the site. The home page's location on a server at Columbia University (www.columbia.edu) is suggested by the Web address, providing a tentative profile of the author as a person of Sudanese ethnicity or nationality living and studying or working in the U.S. In short, Tarig Monawar is a member of that general class of Internet users identified by Terranova [10] and Hoffman and Novak (1998) who are probably highly educated and affluent. However, the justification of this single-handed construction of ethnicity lies in the allusion to an "experiential authority" [11] which suggests that the author has lived in Sudan. While he does not write about his own life, he writes about Sudan as if it has a prominent part in his own life and identity.

Because the Web makes the identities of content creators at times elusive, it problematises the task of distinguishing between self-produced and objectified representations of ethnicity. Unless a site, in which ethnicity is the primary subject, strongly indicates the author's membership to that ethnicity, it is difficult to determine whether the writing is biographical or auto/biographical, whether the author is writing about others or themselves.

Similarly, "The Bangladeshi Home Pages" [12] appear to be addressing a Bangladeshi readership. The site seems to be the work of one person, Zunaid Kazi, who claims copyright on the content and the right to nominate as well as choose the Bangladeshi of the year 1997, �who, for better or for worse, has had the most impact on Bangladesh and Bangladeshis�. However, Noori felt alienated as an audience member for this Web site because of her gender, believing that she was not the intended reader.

> "I couldn't find anything because I am Bangladeshi and I am a woman and there's nothing."

> "None of these Web sites were aimed at women, they had men in mind and weren't bothered if women accessed them or not ... [they are] not going out of their way to cover issues important to women." (Noori — interview)

Noori actively resists this Web site's attempt at speaking to and on behalf of people of Bangladeshi ethnicity.

Like Tarig Monawar, Zunaid Kazi also seems to be a student or academic, but presumably of Bangladeshi ethnicity, at a U.S. university, as indicated by the 'edu' suffix in the site's original Web address. What does this suggest about relationships of power within ethnic minorities when it comes to Web production, representation and possibly consumption? It gives some indication that Web production by ethnic minorities is located largely in the U.S., that those who are writing about the ethnic communities of which they are part, are actually on the peripheries of a diaspora. This corresponds with Mitra's study [13] of the soc.culture.indian newsgroup, which found that most participants were from the U.S. with only a minority in India itself. With the number of Web users in the U.S. outnumbering those from developing regions of the world by nearly 7:1 (Pruett and Deane, 1999), the representation of ethnicities from developing nations on the Web, according to Zurawski (1996), is being led and possibly manipulated by "techno-elites" from outside those homelands. This demonstrates Hall's (1998) argument that new digital technologies allow new forms of individual power which, in the above cases, are being applied in the name of self-determination as well as to forge a kind of ethnic expertise.

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Communal female spaces

The research subjects seemed to favour ethnic Web sites which had a common element of self-help and community service, but which allowed for diversity and contradictions. Many of these were explicit in their use of the auto/biographical 'I' or 'we'. For example, the "South Asian Women Together" site [14], visited by Noori, is constructed by a collective of women of south Asian ethnicities who are "committed to challenging the stereotypes we encounter in Canada by emphasising our diverse experiences". For Noori, this site was more acceptable because the

individual authors do not presume to speak on behalf of anyone other than themselves.

The role of women in this discourse of self-help was significant. Despite the general mantra that they are under-represented in cyberspace [15], the evidence indicates that they are particularly noticeable in this area of the Web, which may imply a very strategic use of the technology.

The prominence of women was evident in my own visits to Chinese self-help Web sites (without even having to actively search for sites produced by women), particularly those pertaining to dating and introductions, in which women initiated the process of finding a mate:

> "... we are a group of some 20 mainland Chinese ladies, who have joined together to share facilities and make contact with Western and overseas Chinese gentlemen." [16]

> "Asian girls/women from Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, including Japanese, Vietnamese, and Chinese, want to know American/Western men. See our photo biographies!" [17]

One of these sites, called "Meow-Meow's Club", with all its connotations of Asian tiger/Siamese cat-like Oriental mystique, could be interpreted as yet another example of the sexual objectification of the non-white female body [18], and particularly the exoticisation of Asian women (Nakamura, 1999). However, these representations of Asian femininity are not ones of passivity and demureness, but the overt statement of the personal, as seen in the use of the autobiographical 'we' and 'us', which is consistent with feminist praxis [19]. Also, it resists one-dimensionality through its fusion of images of heterosexuality with those expressing a desire to build diasporic and cross-cultural connections.

These syncretic intersections and interactions were similarly apparent in a site addressed www.ibride.com [20], suggesting that it may be for either Internet or international brides, and therefore aimed at a specific female readership. The site has an "Etiquette Meeting Room" in which advice was sought on conducting cross-cultural weddings:

> Message from Terry: "I am Korean and my fiance is Chinese. We are having a big western wedding, but I would also like to incorporate both Chinese and Korean traditions into our ceremony and reception. Anybody run into similar situations and/or may have ideas on how to do this?"

> Follow-up message from Shirley: "I too am in the same type of situation. I'm Chinese and husband to be is Irish. We're going to have the invitation both in English and Chinese. We're going to have an American buffet, but all the announcement[s] [will] be in both language[s]."

Such sites are illustrative of the ways in which ethnic minority women are applying the Web to the building of communities and how the Web's interconnectivity facilitates the participation of women (Plant, 1997), especially those from ethnic minorities, who, as Luttrell [21] argues, due to their marginalisation, have a community-oriented consciousness. It is perhaps through this both technical and social networking that ethnic minority women can affirm their status as the knowledge bearers within their families and communities [22]. It constructs a kind of ethnic expertise but one that is not patronising or compromising.

All of the mentioned ethnic self-help Web sites — where women are discernible — have their own idiosyncratic forms of ethnic expertise. Their common characteristic seems to be a not great distinction between those who are the experts and those who aren't. The relationship between the former and latter is more horizontal than hierarchical. "Experiential authority" [23] and self-representation are more important compared to institutional authority or the right to speak on behalf of others. However, it would be incorrect to designate this as a female quality in Web texts: It merely implies the preference of ethnic minority women for communal kinds of self-representation, perhaps ones that do not reveal highly personal information. The marginalisation of ethnic minority women may steer them towards Web texts that have a more community-oriented consciousness [24].

Indeed, it would be also inaccurate to suggest that the research subjects tended to select Web texts produced by other ethnic minority women. Rather, some preferred the highly individualised auto/biographical Web texts written by ethnic minority men. But it was not clear whether this was because of the idiosyncrasies of the sites, or simply a matter of being unable to locate more forms of auto/biography by women: Miller and Mather (1998) found there were five times more home pages by men than women.

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The lone male voice

The lone ethnic male voice on the Web can be seen in the article "Commentary: US gives black Briton a new kind of racism" [25], chosen by Champagne. The article is part of the online edition of the *Detroit News.* The writer, Gary Younge, refers to the politics of identity and identification that takes place within ethnic minorities through his personal experience of being a black British journalist in the U.S.:

> "Often people just think I am showing off. This is especially the case with African Americans. All I have to do is open my mouth and they prime themselves to ask "Who are you trying to impress with that accent?" ... Here in America, I look local and sound foreign ... At home, I look foreign and sound local — and everybody tries hard not to notice. To say one is better or worse than the other would be too simplistic. The bottom line is that I will soon return to a racism I understand."

This individual representation of ethnicity by Gary Younge, made on his own behalf, resists attempts by ethnic "leaders" to speak for him as clearly, he encountered obstacles in being embraced as a member of the black community in the U.S. His blackness was judged on the basis of his national affiliation, as marked by his accent, and became the grounds for his exclusion rather than inclusion. Younge refers to his ostracism as a kind of racism from within, one that he does not comprehend, presumably because the Black Power movement, which originated in the U.S. reconstructed blackness as a sign of political solidarity amongst diverse black ethnicities [26]. Younge's experience exemplifies the construction of ethnicity as a struggle, one, in this case, he has overcome with his participation in media which gives him the authority to speak and access to the representational tools of the Web.

It is evident from Younge's article, that the Web enables individual representations of ethnicity to be made and seen. Nevertheless, this is the work of a professional writer: Younge is a reporter for the *Guardian.* It is an individual cultural commentary which has institutional approval to represent membership to a particular ethnic community. There were other instances of auto/biography on the Web by people from ethnic minorities, but which were entirely unofficial.

Home pages are auto/biographical texts produced by (largely male) individuals on the Web (Miller and Mather, 1998). They have different manifestations, but generally, do not claim to speak for anyone else except the author. More specifically, Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998), call these *personal* home pages because they have been created by individuals. As a result, they are concerned with personal experience and, indeed, rely upon it to give credence to its content. That is, they exude "experiential authority" [27] as they are premised upon the self.

The egocentrism of home pages is implied ironically in "Eon's Opinionated Page" [28], which was chosen by Champagne. It is simply a page of text with no links to other Web sites, so it is completely self-contained and firmly in the category of home pages Miller (1995) defines as "Hi, this is me (as an individual)":

> "... I'm not African-American. I'm Black ... Very few of the Black people you're likely to meet on the street in the US are actually African-Americans. What they are is Black Americans. Anyway, you can just call me Black."

Eon emphasises his individuality by dissociating himself from African-American ethnicity and locating himself within the black diaspora. Champagne seems to have chosen this site as it corresponds with her firm views in regard to ethnicity being about "where you are at" not "where you are from" (Gilroy, 1991):

> "I define myself as black british ... My mother was born in Barbados and my father born in Grenada which makes them Westindian and I suppose I would be defined as WestIndian too. I personally do not [accept] this definition ... it's just that I have no real bond with a country that I have never seen and probably could not fit into. All I know is my birthplace and I appreciate and love being British. I cannot love what I do not know or understand. HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS." (Champagne)

Therefore, "Eon's Opinionated Page" is as much a statement of Champagne's ideological position as it is of Eon's personal identity. It is also a declaration of his and her membership to their respective communities (Miller and Mather, 1998). More often, home pages represent the intersection of various, even numerous communities, of which the author is part. Here, the Web is not used to faciliate community development, it is merely used for self-representation, or as Miller (1995) describes it, self-advertisement.

The Web enables information to be constantly adapted, arranged and changed.

An example is "David Yuan's Home on the Internet" [29], which, as a multifarious Web page, also acts as a metaphor for the author's identity.

It exemplifies the process of "bricolage" in its temporality: The pages are scattered with signifiers of Christmas like holly wreaths, trees and the heading "Happy Holidays"; also there are specific items which are marked as "new":

> "The first Internet Chinese version of the Holy Bible is now available."

The Web enables information to be constantly adapted, arranged and changed; facilitating the work of the ethnic "bricoleur" as they "duck and dive" from objectified representations of their ethnicities in the generation of their own. The practice of adding and subtracting aspects from his home page also highlights particular facets of Yuan's identity at different times. The recent link to a site in which the Bible can be read in Chinese, depicts his ethnicity and (possibly new) religious affiliation. The prominent logo for La Trobe University indicates his proud membership in an Australian educational institution, which he verifies more specifically:

> "I am now a postgraduate student in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia ... Of course, I can never stop learning about the fantastic world of computing and writing my C codes."

This can be defined as the type of page Miller (1995) describes as "This is me as a member of an organisation", but it also has more informal qualities in its incorporation of quite personal information and its connotations of the communities with which Yuan is associated. It is through this inclusion of small detailed pieces of data that the process of "bricolage" in his identity construction becomes apparent: Thus far, he has represented himself as a Christian computing student of Chinese ethnicity living in Australia. His reference to his favourite kinds of software and hardware perhaps define him as a "nerd", although as Squires [30] argues, this image has been largely assigned to young, white, North American males.

The German subheading "Herzlich willkommen auf meiner Homepage", combined with Yuan's claim that he is currently learning Spanish and his apparent Chinese literacy, show that he is mutlilingual. His exhaustive list of places where he has lived and institutions where he has studied; his favourite cinema, airline, colours, sports, supermarket, and telephone company, amongst many other things; further expands his identity as a Christian computing student of Chinese ethnicity living in Australia exponentially. Therefore, the home page seems to be an idiosyncratic form of representation with which Web authors stake their unique place in the world. As Miller and Mather (1998) propose, the Web is where people emphasise who they are, not where "people go to be someone else".

For ethnic minority authors of home pages, the Web seems to be the ultimate medium for auto/biography, where the individual and personal is prioritised over the communal. Nevertheless, the communities to which the Web author belongs are always a constituent part of the self-representation, whether this is subtle (with no direct references or links) or unequivocal (in the form of links from the Web page), albeit their membership to ethnic minorities is not necessarily privileged.

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Conclusions

Home pages take self-representation to its logical conclusion, but as Rubio asks, who is listening as everyone is exercising their right to express themselves?

> "It's a denial of community, an orgy of solipsism ... ."
> (Rubio, 1996)

Home pages make the Web appear to be a cacophony of heterogenous auto/biographical voices. For those who participate in their production, the Web enables the portrayal of complex ethnicities and identities, as well as resistance to traditional modes of ethnic representation. Paradoxically, for those consuming home pages, they are problematic tools of representation because of their particularity: They become simply another means of looking at and listening to others, never quite able to nor wanting to articulate the broader themes connecting communities. In short, they embody the tensions between the individual, the communal, the biographical and auto/biographical in the construction of ethnicity and identity.

> "There was not one site that summarised my ethnicity ... I couldn't pick just one and say that represents me!" (Noori)

Noori points to the diversity and complexity of auto/biographical representations of ethnicity that are facilitated by the Web, as well as to the inherent difficulties of capturing the nuances of ethnicity in spite of such multiplicity. The overwhelming display of Web texts produced by ethnic minorities not only depict ethnicities, but construct specific audiences for them through intersections with other aspects of ethnic identity. This can be seen in links to sites for black business enterprises

[31]; Bangladeshi cricket stars; Pakistani poets [32]; and the Internet Chinese Librarians Club [33]. Such sites demonstrate the Web to be a microcosm of the global dispersal of local ethnic communities who have a shared culture or history [34].

Portal sites such as "Blacknet UK", "The Bangladesh home pages" and "Heng Yuan's Chinese Web Directory" mobilise the Web as a technology of resistance for ethnic minorities. Whereas portals have been criticised as a means of limiting access to the Web and directing users to commercial content (Stalbaum and Jevbratt, 1999; Patelis, 1999; Cisler, 1998; Eisenberg, 1998; Stalder, 1998; Fuller, 1999b), they provide access to numerous auto/biographical representations of ethnicities which are difficult to locate in other media:

> "You are not going to see or hear these kind of images on television or film, especially if they are written from a person of another race's point of view." (Askari — interview)

> "... it's something I could not have found from one book, there is no way I could have found one book with all those answers on it." (Rosie — interview)

By employing both experiential and institutional authority, ethnic auto/biographical Web texts could be considered to be at the "frontline" of the politics of representation on the Web, given that they are contributing representations of ethnicity never before seen in other media and challenging a history of images of ethnicity which have not been self-produced. Therefore, their production as well as consumption are potentially empowering, but to varying degrees.

For those members of ethnic minority communities who are writing their lives on the Web, who is their audience? How can they be considered representative of these communities if they are, in fact, "techno-elites" — those ethnic minorities who are members of educational, media, cultural and political institutions in mainly Western countries for whom there are few obstacles to Web access. They are the ones who travel and migrate virtually as well as geographically. They are also the ones who claim the right to speak on behalf of their ethnic communities.

There is not only a social, economic, occupational and geographical bias to ethnic participation on the Web, but a related gendered one too. While the presence of ethnic minority women was apparent in cyberspace, ethnic auto/biography on the Web could still be largely defined as "men's work", given the prominence of representations by ethnic males and their particular tendency to assume an advocacy or leadership role on behalf of their communities.

Finally, can the idiosyncrasies of ethnic auto/biography on the Web ever have more than a limited significance for those consuming these texts? The research subjects, in their consumption and selection of auto/biographical Web representations of ethnicity, mirrored the activities and images of ethnic Web producers by ducking and weaving themselves into and through the Web at the same time as they dodge and resist attempts for their identities to be defined simplistically. That is, ethnic minority Web producers and consumers are able to deploy the Web to reconfigure ethnicity in their own image. But perhaps, inevitably, it is more meaningful for those writing about their own lives than for those reading about others. FM

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Notes

1. Terranova, 1996, p. 72.

2. Kelly and Wolf, 1997, p. 71.

3. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, pp. 159-161.

4. Werbner, 1997, p. 18.

5. Gillespie, 1995, p. 6.

6. T. Monawar. "Republic of Sudan," at http://www.columbia.edu/~tm146/sudan.html, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

7. Fanon, 1967, p. 11.

8. Pieterse, 1992, p. 78.

9. Said, 1995, pp. 1-3.

10. Terranova, 1996, p. 72.

11. Clifford, 1988, p. 35.

12. Z. Kazi. "The Bangladesh Home Pages," at http://axe.asel.udel.edu/~kazi/bangladesh/bd_BOTY97.html, accessed May 2001, no longer available but reincarnated as "Virtual Bangladesh" at http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/.

13. Mitra, 1997, p. 63.

14. "South Asian Women Together," at http://www.uoguelph.ca/~nmallal, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

15. Squires, 1996, p. 200; *Interrogate the Internet,* 1996, pp. 125-127.

16. "Chinese ladies" description in Excite search results.

17. "Meow-Meow�s Club" description in Yahoo search results.

18. hooks, 1992, p. 62; Jones, 1993, p. 253.

19. Stanley, 1997; Stanley, 1990, pp. 12-15.

20. "Cross cultural marriages" at http://www.ibride.com/ibride/meetings/etiqroom/276.html, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

21. Luttrell, 1998, pp. 249-254.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Clifford, 1988, p. 35.

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26. Brah, 1992, pp. 127-128.

27. Clifford, 1988, p. 35.

28. "Eon's Opinionated Page" at http://www.camilleon.com/~eon/rant.html, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

29. "David Yuan's Home on the Internet" at http://www.cs.latrobe.edu.au/~yuand/, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

30. Squires, 1996, p. 200.

31. "Blacknet UK," at http://www.blacknet.co.uk, accessed January 2003.

32. "World of Urdu Poetry," at http://www.pak.org/, accessed January 2003.

33. "Heng Yuan's Chinese Web Directory" at http://ag.arizona.edu/~heng/chinese/chinese.html, accessed May 2001, no longer available.

34. Gillespie, 1995, p. 6.

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