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WHERE IS THE BODY IN DIGITAL RHETORIC?

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I am a member of the last generation who was able to decide when (or if) they would go online. As the '80s progressed, many of my friends discovered bulletin board systems (BBSs) and were having a great time. I managed to put off my entry into the online world for a while, partly because my family was not terribly well off (we got our first computer during my junior year of high school—with an 8088 processor!), and partly because I knew that once I entered I was unlikely to go back. Some of my research on the golden era of computer hacking has examined those days that I lived through as someone who watched it unfold from the outside (Lunceford 2009a), and what is most striking about those early days is the faith that these early adherents of digital life had in removing the limitations of the body (see Rheingold 1991, 2000). Of course the irony that the internet has done much to reveal the bodies of others is not lost on me.

It is clear, however, that new media technologies have created new ways of being in the world. As Marshall McLuhan (1994: 57) put it, media are extensions of the body, and "in this electric age, we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness." Still, as scholars shift the focus to the digital entity, the body remains at the center of our experience as humans. One cannot ignore the material realities of the person who may seem momentarily to exist only in the ether. To that end, in this chapter I will examine two specific elements of digital rhetoric as it relates to embodiment. First, I will explore the utopian ideal of egalitarian discourse on the internet, where an ostensible Habermasian public sphere in which differences of race, class, gender, and other identifiable markers of identity are, in theory, bracketed out. I will argue that this ideal has more to do with a distrust of the body, rooted in both cyberpunk fiction and American Puritanism, than in a desire to engage others as peers. Moreover, I suggest that this erasure of bodily differences weakens the potential for serious rhetorical engagement. Second, I consider the

malleability of digital identity and the rhetorical and material consequences for the body when it is "outed," especially those bodies deemed "other." In short, we must consider the explicit link between the physical body and the virtual body.

Should We Have Bodies in the Public Sphere?

In 1998, Nicholas Negroponte provided perhaps the most unabashedly utopian ideal of the Internet as virtual public sphere when he claimed that war will eventually make no sense because digital space will become more important than physical space and that "nations, as we know them today, will erode because they are neither big enough to be global nor small enough to be local" (Negroponte 1998: 288). Almost two decades later, the geography of the nation state is as important as ever and "cyberwar is now just another component of modern warfare" (Lunceford 2009b: 249). We are thankfully past the time of breathless proclamations that the singularity is upon us and we will finally be able to escape this prison of flesh that we call the body—what Cory Doctorow and Charles Stross (2012) call the *Rapture of the Nerds*. But it has not always been so. The early days of the World Wide Web were laden with utopian sentiment and the belief that we would transcend the problems of the material world, especially the problems of the body and its markers of race, class, gender, nationality, and religion. In John Perry Barlow's (1996) "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," he states, "Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth." In his essay "The Conscience of a Hacker," commonly referred to as the "Hacker Manifesto," The Mentor makes a similar argument: "We exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias … and you call us criminals," concluding, "Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like" (Mentor 1986). Still, despite this egalitarian sentiment, such blindness to difference was more an ideal than an actuality, even among hackers (see Gunkel 2001; Millar 1998; Taylor 1999, 2003).

The belief that one must eliminate individual differences and focus solely on the content of the message in order to have a well-functioning public sphere is nothing new. We have only put a technological coating on Jürgen Habermas's arguments concerning the salons and coffee houses of the eighteenth century. Habermas (1989: 36) argues that in these settings "the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy and in the end can carry the day," with individuals bracketing out differences in an attempt to reach the best possible solution to public concerns. Although Habermas pointed out that this egalitarian ideal was never completely realized in practice, it was, and still remains, a normative standard. Richard Sennett (1996) likewise puts forth the ideal that people should deliberate in public as if they were strangers and suggests that the public sphere began to diminish when people could no longer do so. For Sennett, then,

impersonality may be the savior of the public sphere. Habermas (1989: 36) describes the ideal public sphere as one that "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether."

The digital world allows one to mask at least some markers of race, class, and gender, if only for a short time, making this mode of interaction quite attractive to those holding to an idealized public sphere. As Diana Saco explains:

> The *true digital persona* … exploits the bodiless character of electronic space, allowing one to create one's own alternative identity: indeed, a nonidentity vis-à-vis the embodied individual who constructs it inasmuch as the digital persona need bear no resemblance to one's embodied self. Because online encounters are not face-to-face, none of the usual physical traits and the cultural meanings attached to those traits (e.g., gender, race, affluence) need come into play in our online practices unless we choose to identify ourselves in those terms.
>
> *(Saco 2002: 120)*

Of course this assumes that the creator of the identity provides no information concerning traits that may be considered undesirable in the physical world. By adopting digital personae, citizens are able to come together as anonymous entities. However, one must consider the medium through which these interactions take place. In his study of YouTube, Aaron Hess (2009) found that structural issues such as business practices and copyright laws that limit appeals to authority, along with a penchant for comments to devolve into *ad hominem* attack, limit the site's ability to function as a tool of democratic deliberation. When a medium tends to invite incivility (see Hardaker 2010; Hmielowski, Hutchens, and Cicchirillo 2014; Suler 2004), democratic practice will be limited. As such, anonymity is not enough. Sennett (1996: 264) connects citizenship with the idea of civility, defining civility as "the activity which protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other's company. Wearing a mask is the essence of civility." Adopting a digital persona as a kind of mask should allow for the kind of impersonal interaction championed by Sennett, but this remains to be seen.

This anonymity has become increasingly difficult to maintain as the online world has evolved. There is a world of difference between Facebook Messenger and early chat programs such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat) or ICQ. ICQ, for example, used a number for a username and was not necessarily connected to any other aspect of one's digital presence. Facebook, on the other hand, is connected to one's name, photos, family members, and interactions that can be seen by others. These markers can make it quite easy to discern specific aspects of one's identity— race, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, ethnicity, hobbies, friendships, and whether one has children. All of the questions that one is not supposed to ask in a job interview are on display in one's feed, and the information may not have even been put there by the individual in question. On my own Facebook page, there are many photos of me and my family, and not one of them has been put there by me.

Early text-based programs that fostered one-to-one connections like ICQ made it more difficult for others to reveal one's personal information. It is much more difficult to connect a number to a person than it is to connect a photo and a name to a person.

Even if one were to carefully curate his or her online presence, maintaining a veneer of anonymity is more complicated than it may seem on the surface. In the case of text-based chat programs like ICQ, language comes to the forefront. Then, supposing that one can bracket such attributes as national origin, there is the tacit assumption that all people in the interaction would speak the same language. There are other markers of class built into language that make it difficult to pass oneself off as something other than what he or she is for very long (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Labov 1990). One may also profitably ask why bracketing out differences is a good thing. As a rhetorician, I want to believe that a stronger argument will win out over a weaker argument, but I acknowledge that people often find it much easier to attack the individual than the argument. I also recognize that not all knowledge is situated in the same way. My experience as a white, heterosexual male may be significantly different in certain arenas from that of an African American lesbian, but I have not always realized this fact. Recognizing difference is not the same as recognizing privilege. As Paul Orlowski (2011: 40) observes, "The dominant discourses in a society often work in concert, that is, as discursive formations, to maintain the status quo and further the interests of the privileged." Assuming similarities where they do not exist is a way to ignore differences that matter and to avoid addressing significant questions concerning whose values and voices will be heard and respected. Indeed, expressing opinions and experiences that go against these unspoken norms often has the effect of calling attention to one's status as Other.

Another possible reason why many who celebrate the virtual world seem fixated on bracketing out difference is that focusing on the argument elevates the mind over the body. This is by no means a new impulse; Descartes (1960 [1641]: 74) proclaimed, "it is certain that this 'I'—that is to say, my soul, by virtue of which I am what I am—is entirely and truly distinct from my body and that it can be or exist without it."

Although the Cartesian view may seem like a triumph of rationalism, Elaine Graham (1999) notes that women have generally been associated with nature/embodiment, while men have been associated with culture/technology. As such, this is not only a denigration of the body, but more specifically the perceived femininity of the body. The body is visceral and leaky, and reminds us constantly of its needs and desires. This becomes coded as feminine; Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 203) argues that "women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage. … they are represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity." This is not merely a matter of physical experience, however. Such assessments are also inscribed with moral judgments. Georg Feuerstein (1992: 15) suggests that the Christian "denial or denigration of bodily experience" in which the "body—or the flesh—is regarded as the enemy of the spirit," leads us to view the body as intrinsically sinful

or dirty. As such, it should come as little surprise that cyberpunk literature such as *Neuromancer* describe "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat" (Gibson 1984: 6).

This distrust of the body extends to all body markers that draw attention to any non-conformity to the assumed white, male, Western, educated, heterosexual, cis-gendered bodies of the public sphere. As Nancy Fraser explains:

> Of course, we know, both from the revisionist history and from Habermas's account, that the bourgeois public's claim to full accessibility was not in fact realized. Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds.
>
> *(Fraser 1990: 63)*

Even if we attempt to bracket out differences in theory, in practice the process is more a matter of collaborative construction of selves. As Jordan (2015) observes, the network creates different "readings" of the self. It is tempting to discount these selves because they seem less real to us, but these creations of self reflect and reveal the culture in which we live. Dyens (2001: 33) writes, "The virtual being is real, but of a different kind of real, one that is both organic and technological. This being is a cultural animal, a nonorganic being. The cultural being is in a new stage of evolution." Grandiose pronouncements aside, there is certainly a reality to our digital personae, and these largely reflect that which is desirable in our culture. As such, it is not so much an erasure or bracketing out of differences, but rather an assumption of sameness—a sameness imposed and inscribed by the majority. Still, digital interactions allow one to perform what Lisa Nakamura (1995) calls identity tourism, in which one can attempt to pass for another gender or race. Unfortunately, this often results in a stereotypical performance of race rather than one in which the individual can actually pass. Such attempts end up selling past the close. As Edward Said observes (1993: 160), "if you belong in a place, you do not have to keep saying and showing it: you just are." More importantly, those who are actually Other will easily see past the ruse: "Was there ever a native fooled by the blue- or green-eyed Kims and T. E. Lawrences who passed among them as agent adventurers? I doubt it" (ibid.: 161).

Scholars are now more reserved concerning the potential of a virtual public sphere, but some (Dahlberg 2001, 2005) argue that the differences between cyberspace and the public sphere are less pronounced than previously thought. Zizi Papacharissi (2002: 11) states, "As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions." However, she also notes that special interests may fragment the audience of these discourses, resulting in a kind of tribalization (Papacharissi 2002; see also Sunstein 2001). Even

if the Internet could shape a new virtual public sphere, the problems of access are just as real now as they were in the eighteenth-century salons described by Habermas (1989). In the eighteenth-century public sphere, the main barriers to access were literacy, money, and leisure time. In the twenty-first century, the barriers are much the same, only now it is digital literacy rather than print literacy. Saco (2002: 210) explains, "If cyberspace, in one respect, can break down (physical) barriers, allowing us to roam freely across an electronic frontier, it can also erect new (digital) barriers, both in terms of who gains access and of what can be accessed."

We should avoid over-romanticizing the digital world and resist looking to technology as a way to mask human prejudice. For example, many scholars have maintained that cyberspace is largely masculine space (Gunkel 2001; Millar 1998), and Dawn Dietrich (1997: 178) argues that "women stand to gain little as quasi-disembodied subjects within a network environment *without reference to the material conditions of their subjectivity*" (emphasis original). Like gender, race is still an issue in the online environment as well. Even such seemingly benign activities as online games can be fraught with racism; in her work on World of Warcraft, Nakamura (2009: 137–138) describes how the "dehumanization of the Asian player—they 'all look the same' because they all *are* the same—is evocative of earlier conceptions of Asian laborers as interchangeable and replaceable." Elsewhere, Nakamura (2008a: 1681) concludes, "The process of racialization continues on both the Internet and the outernet, as the 'dirty work' of virtual labor continues to get distributed along racial lines." The digital and physical worlds are not hermetically sealed. As a corrective, Sherry Turkle proposes a stance of *realtechnik*, which suggests that

> we step back and reassess when we hear triumphalist or apocalyptic narratives about how to live with technology. *Realtechnik* is skeptical about linear progress. It encourages humility, a state of mind in which we are most open to facing problems and reconsidering decisions.
>
> *(Turkle 2011: 294)*

Foregrounding the physical, embodied humanity within the digital seems like one way to accomplish this.

When Material and Digital Bodies Converge

Even if we were to accept the notion that the virtual world is a way to invigorate the public sphere, we would have to seriously consider the nature of that space. The very attributes that allow one to bracket out differences can also allow one to spread misinformation anonymously; in the case of digital rhetoric, the eye can easily be deceived. Some examples of this include O. J. Simpson's digitally altered photo on the cover of *Time* which made him appear darker than he is, the common photoshopping of models (especially women) to make them appear more conventionally beautiful (to the point where Dove had an entire advertising campaign based on this process), and the ubiquitous fake nude photos of celebrities. Bodies

can exist in the digital world that do not (and even *cannot*) exist in the physical world (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2003, 2009; Harper and Tiggemann 2008; Reaves et al. 2004). Although we realize that the digital world is malleable, it can be difficult to make the mental adjustment to this reality when viewing the body.

Despite the fiction of these bodies, they matter nonetheless; bodies in the physical world are punished for the actions of the body in the digital world. There is an entire industry surrounding revenge porn, in which the jilted ex-lover posts nude photos of (generally) his former lover (Doom 2015; Stroud 2014). There are also online communities dedicated to "creepshots," or surreptitiously taking photographs of attractive women in yoga pants or bikinis, as well as the related upskirt communities (Davisson 2016). These images can have devastating effects on the individual and the law is only now beginning to address this issue (Doom 2015; Stroud 2014). Finally, there is the moral panic surrounding adolescent sexting, which can place teenagers on sex offender registries and generally upend their lives (Hasinoff 2015; Lunceford 2010, 2011).

The digital and the physical are often intertwined and the material realities of the bodies in the image—race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic class—can limit the potential rhetorical strategies available to them. These issues can be difficult to see in the image itself, but this does not mean that they are not there. In the case of revenge porn, sexting, and creepshots, there is often an impulse to blame the victim by saying that if they did not want such images leaked, they shouldn't have taken nude photos of themselves. However, Lunceford (2010: 242) has argued that if media act as extensions of our bodies, then "we could profitably view new media as an extension of our sexuality." Likewise, Hasinoff (2012: 457), in her work on adolescent sexting, considers how "girls' sexual media production practices, like more celebrated forms of media production, could also enable them to negotiate, respond, and speak back to sexual representations of youth and femininity in mass media." Fear of women's ability to speak back has a long history (Cixous 2001), and digital technologies increase this potential to speak, but also increase the potential for backlash.

As we consider digital rhetorics, an eye toward embodiment reminds us to consider the structural aspects of the medium in question. In addition to considering such issues as accessibility, there are also political and social constraints. For example, while protest movements can use digital media for political change, the dictators they wish to overthrow can use those same media to identify and oppress the protesters. In Egypt, during the events of the Arab Spring, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy posted a photograph of herself wearing only red heels and black stockings on Twitter with the hashtag #NudePhotoRevolutionary as a critique of patriarchal values (Elmahdy 2011). She received death and rape threats, and after being kidnapped, she fled the country and was given political asylum in Sweden (Asad 2013). Such violence is not limited to government entities or supporters. Pakistani social media star Qandeel Baloch was killed by her brother "after he had protested at the 'kind of pictures she had been posting online'" (Saifi and Raja 2016). One can no longer completely separate the physical from the virtual as if they were two

separate realms. As Hess (2014: 4) puts it, "it is not about how the virtual replaces or affects the real, but how *the virtual-online is the real-offline and the real-offline is the virtual-online*" (emphasis original).

There can be significant consequences when the body online is "outed," and connected with a body in the physical world, especially for those coded as Other. People can be outed regarding such attributes as racial status (Nakamura 2008b), sexual orientation (Pollack 1992), trans status (Greenberg 2012), and disability (White 2000). There has long been debate in the LGBTQ community concerning the ethics of outing (see Gross 1993), but the potential for outing has increased with new technologies. Applications such as Grindr allow men who have sex with other men to find each other easily. However, because it is location-based, these men run the risk of being outed (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2015). Although this may seem far-fetched, Russian criminal rings have been using online dating apps to target gay men for robbery and blackmail. Because of their marginalized status, gay men are unlikely to report these crimes to the police (Galperina 2016). The ability to connect the body online to the location of the body in physical space also allows for a whole new level of harassment. When Eron Gjoni falsely accused his ex-girlfriend, Zoë Quinn, on a message board of having sex with a critic in return for a good review of her game, he also revealed some of her personal details (Birmingham 2014). She was quickly doxed, her address and contact information were leaked, and people began sending her death and rape threats. She eventually had to leave her home because the harassment was so intense (Wingfield 2014). Others who spoke out against Quinn's digital assailants were likewise doxed; video game critic Anita Sarkeesian had bomb threats at her speaking engagements, death and rape threats, and someone even designed a video game that involves repeatedly punching her in the face (ibid.). When the online world is able to threaten one's safety and even one's life to such a degree, it becomes clear that one cannot discount the embodied experience of those on the screen simply because it isn't "real."

Embodiment and Digital Rhetoric Studies

So what does all of this mean for rhetorical scholars? First, we need to remember that "ideas belong to human beings who have bodies" (Dewey 1991: 8). Put another way, all rhetoric begins with a body, and the body that one inhabits constrains the kinds of rhetorical strategies available to that person. When one's body is coded as Other, he or she may find something as simple as a declaration of love to be incredibly risky. As such, one's embodied experience will color the possible rhetoric available. Arguments about institutionalized racism will sound much different from someone who has experienced police brutality or racially motivated hate crimes because their bodies bear the memory of these experiences. As rhetorical scholars, we must honor these differences and recognize that not all rhetorical strategies are available to all bodies. There is a body in the text.

On the other hand, although the body has meaning, *the body cannot be completely reduced to a text*. Much as the Habermasian public sphere sought to bracket out

differences in order to focus on the arguments themselves, rhetorical scholars often seek to reduce the speaker's experience down to the speaker's words. One's physical appearance is part of the rhetorical transaction. How the rhetor carries his or her body; the timbre, tone, cadence, and prosody of his or her voice; his or her physical attractiveness—all of these things contribute to one's ability to influence others (Lunceford 2007). We must resist the temptation to remove these non-textual elements because attempts to "'textualize' the body" gives "a kind of free, creative rein to *meaning* at the expense of attention to the body's material locatedness in history, practice, culture" (Bordo 1993: 38). With a focus on text, one can sometimes forget that the rhetoric under examination came from a living, breathing, feeling person. For example, in Sonja Foss's (1994) schema of visual rhetoric, the focus is on the functional aspects of the image. In other words, does it do what it is supposed to do? Valerie Peterson's (2001) alternative schema likewise focuses on the image, but shifts the emphasis to aesthetics. Lucaites and Hariman (2001) come closest to recognizing the humanity of the individuals in the image, but even they fall into the reductive trap, considering the emotions evoked by the image and how the individual stands in synecdochally for an aggregate and thus becomes a symbol. The body is more than its image and its meaning can be incredibly difficult to pin down (see Lunceford 2012).

We must engage the body in all of its complexity. Digital bodies complicate this even further. The body may be digitally altered, faked, or even non-existent. The thoughts, actions, and emotions ascribed to the body may be decontextualized or simply false because the digital body can exist with a more tenuous connection to a physical body. Embodiment is complicated, and the interplay between one's digital persona and physical being can be difficult to parse even for the individual in question. This is doubly so for those who are observing from the outside. However, this is no reason to abdicate our responsibility as critics to examine the body in its complexity. We must consider both the physical elements of the body (e.g., race, gender, appearance) and the less obvious elements (e.g., background, emotions, experiences) that inform the individual's embodiment. Most importantly, we must consider how our analysis might affect the person's lived experience. This is not a call for restraint or self-censorship, but rather a call for *ethical* analysis. Much as the actions taken in the virtual realm can have consequences in the physical realm and vice versa, the judgments that we make as critics likewise have consequences for those placed under the critical lens. We owe it to these individuals as both scholars and fellow humans to provide critiques that take a full account of the rhetorical transaction, and this cannot be done without at least some recognition of that individual's embodied experience.

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12

REVIVING IDENTITY POLITICS

Strategic Essentialism, Identity Politics, and the Potential for Cross-Racial Vernacular Discourse in the Digital Age

Vincent N. Pham

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, clothing company Abercrombie & Fitch (hereafter known as A&F) was at the apex of its popularity. Photos of scantily clad (white) men and women saturated their catalogs and eventually adorned the walls of many college students. As I sat in various communication courses at the University of Illinois as a Biology and Speech Communication double major, controversial news about A&F's recent "Asian-themed" T-shirt line began to surface. These T-shirts, featuring stereotypical and offensive images of Asians, showed up in A&F stores across the nation. Putting forth images of buck-toothed Chinamen with conical hats accompanied with the text:

> Wong Brother's Laundry Service
> Two Wongs can make it white

These T-shirts drew upon historically marginalized communities and commodified stereotypical images for the purpose of branding A&F as edgy and selling racism disguised as "humor." Yet, I do not want to dwell on the actions of A&F nor the protests that sprang in response to the T-shirts; I already documented this instance and Asian American counter-rhetorics to A&F's T-shirt debacle in a previous article (Pham and Ono 2008).

Rather, I want to reflect on *how* I came to know about this instance. What is interesting is that I did not shop at A&F, nor did I see these T-shirts in person. Rather, news of these T-shirts appeared in my university-given student email address. Asian American campus groups at my university in Illinois shared reports of protests from Asian American student groups in Indiana and forwarded press releases from Asian American groups in California. While this seems mundane and unimpressive in our current social media age, this instance ushered in a visible moment when traditional identity politics merged with new technologies; when,