

CVSpace: Musings on Cape Verdean Youth Identity, Technology, and MySpace

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Self-portraits (or web profiles) such as described above have become digital, crafted from pixels. New communication technologies, cyberspace in particular, have become important mediums for the creation, negotiation, and performance of identity. This essay discusses how second-generation Cape Verdean-American youth use new communication technologies for identity production. It examines the process by which second-generation Cape Verdean identity is articulated, reified, and renegotiated at MySpace.com. It shows how racial identity is central to the use of new communication technologies like MySpace.

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It's sunny and hot and hundreds of Cape Verdean youth are in attendance at the Annual Cape Verdean festival in Providence, Rhode Island. I'm excited about meeting several potential participants. However, given the exuberance that develops and excitement that comes with attending cultural festivals in the middle of the summer when people are spry and high on sunshine, many interested participants had little time to talk. "I'm definitely down," said one potential participant, "but there goes my cousin...hit me up on MySpace and we'll connect." Excited, but also disappointed, I continued on only to be told by another would be participant to check out their MySpace and get back to them. Again, I continued on. I was getting the sense that MySpace and Facebook were much more important than I had originally thought. Later, I was asked if I had a MySpace account and when I replied "No" the participant responded with an emphatic "you got to get one bro!"¹

Anxious to start my field research on second-generation Cape Verdean youth, I went home and immediately turned on my computer. I went to MySpace.com and began to browse for people I met at the festival. Informant found! Thus, I start with a click of the mouse. The webpage begins to load, but before the page loads completely music comes whispering out of my weak desk speakers. The music sounds familiar. I turn up my speakers—it is Cape Verdean-American rapper Chachi Carvalho's "Cape Verdean in America." As the music plays, I bounce my head to the beat of the song while Pan-African colors (i.e. red, black, and green) fill my once black 15-inch computer screen. Words and pictures appear next. More specifically, I get a brief biography (and picture) of the creators of the domain. I learn where they are from, where they live, their age, marital status, cultural influences, hobbies, and the like. I scroll down and a montage of photos of black nationalists and revolutionaries such as Amílcar Cabral, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, and others hang together on the left side of the page. The page is fully loaded, a virtual gallery of sorts, where pictures, biographies, list of friends, and music all clamor for my attention. Tired, after a long day in the field (and virtual field), not to mention sensory overload, I sign off, forgetting to create a MySpace account for myself. On the following day I establish a MySpace account.

Self-portraits (or web profiles) such as described above have become digital, crafted from pixels. New communication technologies, cyberspace in particular, have become important mediums for the creation, negotiation, and performance of identity. In this essay I will discuss how second-generation Cape Verdean-American youth use new communication technologies for identity production. Although important this essay is by no means an exhaustive or comprehensive account of Cape Verdean identity and communication technologies, rather it is merely suggestive. I examine the process by which second-generation Cape Verdean identity was articulated, reified, and renegotiated at MySpace.com. By observing several MySpace pages, I witnessed the process by which members of the Cape Verdean diaspora negotiated the meaning of blackness and Cape Verdeanness, that is, how blackness and Cape Verdeanness are articulated in cyberspace?

¹ Initially, I thought social networking sites like MySpace, Friendster, Bebo, Facebook, and others, were nothing more than technologically advanced versions of Internet chat rooms, where spammers, computer nerds, and teenagers virtually hung out.

In other words, I explore the ways in which blackness, identity, technology, and cultural politics are imagined and performed in cyberspace. I show how identity is central to the use of new communication technologies like MySpace. More specifically, what is being expressed? To what extent does the Web continue with traditional representational practices? To this end, I juxtapose more traditional spaces for ethnographic observation with a virtual space like MySpace in order to map subtle differences in the construction and performance of identity online.

Situating Cape Verde

Before discussing second-generation Cape Verdean youth identity it is useful to consider some of the archipelago's history. The Republic of Cape Verde (in Portuguese, *Republica de Cabo Verde*) is a small West African country consisting of ten volcanic islands and five islets 300 miles due west of the westernmost point of Africa. The majority of the population of the drought-scourged islands of Cape Verde is *Crioulo* or *mestiço*, made up from early relationships between slave masters and slave women. As a result, the people of Cape Verde descended from both European and African ancestry, developing a hybrid Luso-African culture.

The history of Cape Verde has been shaped tremendously by emigration. The motivation to leave Cape Verde, historically and contemporarily, is connected to the somewhat inhospitable landscape of the archipelago, made all the more difficult by frequent and long periods of drought. As a result, more Cape Verdeans live in diaspora than within the republic. The best estimate puts the Cape Verdean diaspora between 370,000 and 650,000 people. The oldest and largest diasporic population lives in the U.S., particularly in the Greater Boston area.

A Note on Methodology

This paper is part of a larger project that explores the ways in which second-generation Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area negotiate their identity as Cape Verdean and, by extension, as black. The framework of qualitative methodology was used in order to map second-generation Cape Verdean youth racial identity. More specifically, this project involved ethnographic fieldwork that included formal and informal interviews, textual analysis, and most importantly participant-observation. In order to maximize the richness of information, the sampling strategy I utilized was purposeful and not random. More specifically, I utilized homogeneous and snowball sampling techniques. Homogeneous purposeful sampling was useful due to my desire for people from a specific geographical location and age-grade.

My project is interested in the production, circulation, and consumption of texts written, verbal, broadcast, visual, material, musical, etc, for identity and by extension the lived experience cannot be properly comprehended without understanding the consumption and use of texts. To this end, music, fashion and other symbolic artifacts, in particular hip-hop music and fashion are of great relevance and importance. Texts are entwined in our everyday lives, thus provide a shared social and cultural currency. Young Cape Verdeans, like others, draw on the symbolic worlds of media in thinking about themselves, who they are and who they might become. Attention to various forms

of popular text allowed me to explore the significance of popular forms in the processes of racial identity formation.

It is imperative for any ethnography interested in understanding youth culture and identity formation to look to media technologies. Webzines, blogs, etc. have reconfigured the cultural space which ethnographers have to cross since they play a significant role in youth culture and by extension identity formation. Therefore, I look to the Internet (including blogs, homepages, chat rooms, and myspace.com) in order to assess how Cape Verdeans use media to help define themselves and their networks.

Cyberscapes and Racial Identity

Over the past decade, scholarly interest on the relationship between race and technology has grown. The scholastic interest and enthusiasm has reached such a height that the Center for Black Studies at the University of California-Santa Barbara has launched the Race and Technology Project, while also playing host to an international Ford Foundation sponsored conference (in 2005) entitled “AfroGeeks: Global Blackness and the Digital Public Space.” Noteworthy texts on the intersections of race and technology include *TechniColor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (2001), *Crossing the Digital Divide: Race, Writing, and Technology in the Classroom* (2004), *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* (2005), and many peer-reviewed journal articles. Despite the academic eagerness, most of the work on race and technology and technological practices focuses on the seemingly ever-growing digital divide and potential for remedial initiatives to bring about universal access and participation in new informational technologies for people of color nationally and globally.² Important issues, undoubtedly, but issues about race and technology extend beyond the focus of this recent scholarship.³ As a result, there exists an imbalance in understanding race, representation, and cyberspace.

Issues of access frame most accounts about new communication technologies and race. The proverbial digital divide – “the troubling gap between those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not” – is a ubiquitous trope in most literature concerning race and new technologies (Compaine 2001; Mehr, et. al: 2004: 782). Yet, the most recent study by the Department of Commerce (2004) suggests that the digital divide is not a crisis of extreme concern. Internet use for instance has continued to increase regardless of age, class, race, or gender. According to the report, nearly 40 percent of black people are on-line.⁴ Further, the population of young on-line users has grown in recent years (Lenhart & Madden 2005). Despite economic inequalities, in 2000 a study showed that the majority of low-income urban black youth surveyed in 10 urban cities had access to Internet use (MEE Productions 2004). Many of those interviewed for my larger project on Cape Verdean youth identity participated in a wide range of on-line activities, from sending e-mails, creating on-line cultural

² Here I am referring to The One Laptop per Child Association (laptop.org).

³ By making this criticism I am knowingly omitting the literature on Afrofuturism.

⁴ Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration. “A Nation Online: Entering the Broadband Age (2004).” <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/reports/anol/index.html>. Retrieved May 26, 2008.

productions, buying clothing, and, most importantly hanging out in social network sites like MySpace. My informants were frequently online. Furthermore, if the literature is not talking about the digital divide, it focuses on the leveling-effect new technologies may have in creating a society where social constructions such as race, gender, and class do not matter. The Internet is viewed as a techno-utopia of sorts, a utopian space where race does not appear; it is where dreams of a post-racial world are lived. People, it seems, are magically freed from the constraints of race. Cyberspace provides the opportunity for people to play with and transcend traditional identities, examples of which are race and gender (Danet 1998). As long as one does not reveal his or her body via a visual representation, s/he can play and perform multiple identities online (Nakamura 1999; 2002).⁵ For instance, Nakamura (2002) argues that the Web has allowed surfers to engage in a cyber tourism and “play” or perform the role of the other. She argues that race and body in cyberspace become separate. While the potential to transcend race and to play with racial identity exists in cyberspace, the fact is that race continues to exert its influence as a concept, an idea, as a performance in cyberspace (See Everett 2007; Ignacio 2005; Kolko et. al 2000; Nakamura 2002). The performance of race is just as apparent online as it is in person. For instance, there are a plethora of “identity” websites devoted to specific groups and communities (e.g. theRoot.com, blackvoices.com). Further, with sites like Youtube.com, a video-sharing website where users can upload, share, and watch video clips, visual representations of race and the body are seldom severed.

MYSPACE.COM⁶

Launched in 2003, MySpace now boasts over 50 million registered users; users who check their profiles everyday and spend hours updating their profiles; only Yahoo! has more page views than MySpace. MySpace users are between the ages of 14-24 on average (Boyd 2006).

MySpace is a social network site that features a profile page and links to friends on the system. Setting up an online identity is fairly simple. Provide your name, address, and e-mail address, after which you are ready to create an online identity. MySpace allows users to personalize their pages by incorporating images, videos, and music which, as I described above, all clamor for the viewer’s attention. MySpace users can also blog, that is, provide commentary about current events and/or a particular subject. It also includes a section “About Me,” where you can post your name and other physical traits.

⁵ Lisa Nakamura provides us with the term “identity tourism” which describes the process where one plays with identity that would not be ascribed offline. As she states, “[in] cyberspace players do not ever need to look for jobs or housing, compete for classroom attention, or ask for raises. This ensures that identity tourists need never encounter situations in which exotic otherness could be a liability, an aspect of racial passing on the Internet that contributes to its superficiality”(Nakamura 1999: 56).

⁶ I use MySpace.com because of its popularity among Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area. Further, its popularity offers insight into identity production that exists on other sites.

In short, profiles are personalized to express an individual's tastes, beliefs, and values, it is constructed to give the viewer a sense of who they are.

Once an account is created and constructed, a considerable amount of time is spent updating one's profile – posting comments, blogging, uploading photos and videos, and changing the site's music. However, checking and sending messages constitutes the main activity of users. It is what brings them back everyday. This was confirmed by many of my informants MySpace was part of their everyday lives.

MySpace as a part of the everyday life of Cape Verdean youth is methodologically interesting, for my participation in the everyday life of Cape Verdean youth, was originally limited to cultural festivals, music concerts, and student group performances. Creating a MySpace account allowed me to have a small, albeit virtual, window into the everyday lives of Cape Verdeans. In other words, it was one of few areas where I was able to apply the Geertzian (1973) method of “deep hanging-out.”

Racial Representations Online

Performative practices are part of the everyday lives of Cape Verdean youth, be it consuming or producing hip-hop music or dressing the body in a particular way. In doing so they convey something about their identity; the salient aspects that they want people to see. To this end, my observations suggested that sites like MySpace are far from a refuge from race. Rather, there was little difference between the virtual and the real. Cape Verdean youth created photographic collages of Amílcar Cabral, black nationalists as Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton, and reggae superstar Bob Marley. They blogged about contemporary political issues salient to black communities such as the “Free Mumia Campaign,” the Jena 6 case, and the murder of Shawn Bell. And, they pasted photos of themselves in the latest hip-hop fashion.

MySpace profiles were just another mechanism by which Cape Verdean youth signaled information about their racial and ethnic identity. Thus, cyberspace is not a domain where race ceases to exist, nor is it where “race happens” (Nakamura 2002: xi), for race never just happens. The centrality of race and ethnicity on MySpace could be attributed to several factors. First, MySpace is an image-centered site where photos and videos are prominent features of a users profile. Posting photos of yourself and others makes one's site attractive to surfers. Therefore, to play with one's racial identity on MySpace becomes exceedingly difficult given that the body is visually represented. Second, identity on MySpace must be somewhat honest, for it is used not only to meet virtually, but it is also used to meet people physically; merging the virtual and the real. MySpace pages are social bulletins of sorts that highlight where one is going, where one is performing, and where one has been. Third, Cape Verdean youth may simply seek continuity between the real and the virtual. They want to make sure that their racial and ethnic content (i.e. racial authenticity) and intentions (i.e. racial sincerity) are carried out throughout cyberspace, where they could remain raceless. In other words, this continues the process of identity in a realm where race could be left out. This self-monitoring may highlight what Foucault noted in *Discipline and Punish* (1991), that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of

power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 1991: 202-03). For whatever reason, the dynamics of racial identity production play out visibly in new communication technologies like MySpace.

Cape Verdean Youth and the Virtual Imagined Community
(Remixing Notions of Diaspora)

We are in an era of technospheric space, where dislocated geographical points merge and re-pollinate one another in virtual realms (Mannur 2003: 283).

The above epigraph speaks of a new phenomenon emerging in diasporic communities, the emergence of virtual communities (See also Bernal 2005). Per Mannur’s incite, cyberspace must be taken seriously when thinking about diasporas. To speak of diaspora or, better yet, to theorize about diaspora without reference to the World Wide Web and other cyberscapes is inadequate and wrong headed, for many diasporas “are already mediated through cyber and digital scapes” (Mannur 2006: 283). Thus, any work on Cape Verdean diasporic identities engage with the Internet. Access to cyberspace allows Cape Verdean youth to connect, albeit in a virtual sense, with others in diaspora and to others in the homeland. Thus the Internet makes diasporic connections to the homeland more intimate than ever before or in ways not possible in the past. The creation of the Internet has allowed for various diasporic zones of alliance to develop (e.g. virtual newspapers). Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area are able to forge communal links in new and exciting ways. With the click of the mouse, Cape Verdean youth can connect with other Cape Verdeans globally, wherever they are located.

Speaking of her experience and connection with the Papua New Guinean diaspora, Mannur (2006: 285) suggests, “the World Wide Web has served as a way to keep those webs of affiliation spinning. We can feel that we were part of a community that is not in danger of becoming an ossified memory.” Similarly, Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area use various social networking sites, mainly MySpace, to connect with other Cape Verdean youth in diaspora. Further, youth within the archipelago, the geopolitical borders of Cape Verde, are able to connect and reconnect with youth abroad, thus extending their own sense of community. In other words, social networking sites such as MySpace connect users throughout the world, throwing conventional ideas of diaspora into question.

Based on my preliminary observations, MySpace strengthens transnational ties and creates virtual diasporic communities. For instance, it was not uncommon for Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area to have virtual Cape Verdean friends from the archipelago, Portugal, Angola, France, and the Netherlands. As a result, MySpace users may feel the social pressure to be more Cape Verdean when performing their online identities. More importantly, social network sites promote informal learning, where Cape

Verdean youth can learn about Cape Verdean history and historical figures. The MySpace pages that I frequented, for instance, preserved the legacy of Amílcar Cabral with photos, excerpts from speeches, songs of dedication, and more. Many were replete with romanticized metaphors of looking back to the past, that is, the war of liberation. These symbols and images create a complex set of metaphors by which Cape Verdean youth live (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

MySpace is where social interaction takes place and where common ties are established. New communication technologies serve as an alternative, yet common, source of community in a world comprised of fluid boundaries and displacement. Online discourse builds cohesion by creating identities rooted in a history and by transmitting culture. A common thread that binds Cape Verdean youth from the Greater Boston area together with other Cape Verdean youth around the world is issues of marginalization and displacement. MySpace provides a forum where members discuss shared interests and experiences from which they build a sense of belonging to a greater whole and sense of solidarity, which has the potential to manifest itself into collective action (Ebeling 2007). Leonce Gaiter suggests, “The Web could be...an extraordinary political tool...But only if we are finally willing to forego the dreams of terra firma to which we’ve hitched our star for all of our postwar history. We must acknowledge that the world into which we so desperately sought entree is dying -- and we, like the majority, must embrace new and untested worlds if we are to prosper” (Gaiter 1997). However, Cape Verdean youth have already embraced “new worlds.” In fact, people working for the “Free Tem Blessed Campaign” used the Internet to quickly spread information about the arrest and trial of Cape Verdean rapper Tem Blessed.⁷ Seen in this light, new communication technologies are central to a diasporic consciousness and coalition building. As ships once connected people, now the Internet, microchips and microprocessors, home computers, e-mail, and social network sites like MySpace connect and recreate a robust sense of self within the matrix of the Cape Verdean diaspora (Gilroy 1993). We must keep in mind however that while virtual homelands and diasporic communities may share similarities across oceans and fiber optic lines, racial identities are specific to location and context.

In the end, new technologies serve as a means remix and reconfigure identities and notions of diaspora. MySpace identities, more specifically, would cease to exist if not for the plethora of information on and about Cape Verde, images of black revolutionaries, downloadable music, and more. At the hands of its users, pictures of Amílcar Cabral and others can be accessed and pasted as a backdrop for a site’s content or used on the periphery of the webpage as a revolutionary iconic frame, complete with a social conscious audible from the likes of rappers Tem Blessed and others. If nothing more, new communication technologies like MySpace, play a meaningful role in the construction of race and ethnicity, for it provides a space for a discourse that articulates

⁷ Tem Blessed, a Cape Verdean-American rapper, was arrested, abused, and detained by Massachusetts State Police on October 16, 2006. He has been charged with resisting arrest, threatening to commit a crime, malicious destruction of property over \$250, disorderly conduct and assault and battery on a police officer. A campaign was started accusing the police of racial profiling and police brutality.

the lives of black people more generally and Cape Verdean youth more specifically. In other words, the Internet provides a space for Cape Verdean youth to experiment with identity, where they can share experiences, and focus on black history, culture, and social conditions.

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